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THE FUTURE OF AL-QAEDA

RESULTS OF A FORESIGHT PROJECT

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This report contains the results of a research project led by the academic outreach program of the Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS) to explore the future of the Al-Qaeda phenomenon. It consists of alternative future scenarios developed during a workshop, as well as four original papers written by individual specialists at the request of CSIS. The report is not an analytical document and does not represent any formal assessment or position of CSIS or the Government of Canada. All components of the project were held under Chatham House rule; therefore, the identity of the authors and the participants is not disclosed.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

WHAT COULD AL-QAEDA LOOK LIKE IN 2018? 5

AL-QAEDA CENTRAL AND AL-QAEDA IN IRAQ IN 2018 21

- Assumptions 21
- Capacity 25
- Change Drivers 30
- Al-Qaeda Core and Al-Qaeda in Iraq in 2018 37

AL-QAEDA IN THE ISLAMIC MAGHREB IN 2018 41

- Influence of Transnational Networks on AQIM 43
- Current Polarisation and Challenges: *Aqimland* or Not? 44
- AQIM Structures and an Evaluation of their Development 47
- AQIM and its Prospects for Regional and Inter-regional Cooperation 49
- Towards "Sub-jihadisation"? 50

DEFEAT, DISPERSAL AND DECLINE: BLEAK PROSPECTS FOR AL-QAEDA IN EAST AFRICA IN 2018 53

- A Brief History of AQEA 53
- Harakaat Al-Shabaab Al-Mujaahidiin 57
- Al-Hijra (Muslim Youth Centre) 61
- Ansaar Muslim Youth Centre (AMYC) 65
- Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP): A Future Host for AQEA? 66

AL-QAEDA IN THE ARABIAN PENINSULA: PROFILE, PRESUMPTIONS AND PREDICTIONS TO 2018 69

The Jihadist Milieu and the Rise of AQAP 70
The Role of the Tribes 73
Future Prospects 76

ENDNOTES 79

THE FUTURE OF AL-QAEDA
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WHAT COULD AL-QAEDA LOOK LIKE IN 2018?

Challenged for more than a decade by a determined global counter-terrorism (CT) campaign, Al-Qaeda (AQ) is facing an uncertain future. The death of Osama bin Laden, the popular uprisings spreading across the Middle East and North Africa, and the global recessionary pressures that are causing governments to re-evaluate their CT strategies are amongst the many far-reaching developments that will influence AQ's future prospects.

How AQ adapts to the challenges and opportunities that will shape its next decade is a source of spirited debate amongst government officials, academic experts, think-tank analysts and private consultants. Insofar as this lack of consensus suggests that AQ's path is not yet set, it creates a need to explore its alternative futures. To this end, the Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS) launched a foresight project in September 2012 to explore how AQ might evolve along any one of three model paths over the course of the next five years: gradual decline; incremental growth; and rapid growth.

The project was based exclusively on open-source information so as to combine the expertise and imagination of participants representing a wide array of professional and personal backgrounds and several countries. To set the context, four papers covering the AQ network's prominent actors were presented at information sessions hosted by the CSIS Academic Outreach program. Written by prominent specialists who took part in the entire project, the papers are included in this report but the identity of their authors is not disclosed because the Chatham House rule was invoked throughout the exercise. The foresight workshop itself took place on 24-25 January 2013 in Ottawa.

Workshop participants recognised that part of the challenge in imagining AQ's future lies in the very definition of AQ. At its broadest, the phenomenon includes a central group of senior leaders commonly referred to as AQ Core, regional affiliates which together with that core make up the AQ network, like-minded groups in the network's key operating areas (eg, fellow travellers), homegrown Islamist extremists in Western countries, sympathisers across the

globe and the AQ ideology itself. While remaining mindful of this complexity, participants focussed the scenarios on the AQ elements that will have the most profound effects on the broader phenomenon's future prospects: AQ Core and its network affiliates (specifically: Al-Qaeda in Iraq, or AQI; Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, or AQAP; Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, or AQIM; and Al-Qaeda in East Africa, or AQEA).

Participants similarly appreciated that a wide range of external forces will play an important role in shaping AQ's future prospects, including shifts in the world economy and changes in the Western world's counter-terrorism posture. Accordingly, they kept this broader environment in mind while concentrating on the variable that repeatedly emerged as a powerful point of focus across the AQ network: uncertainty in the future stability and governance of the regions where AQ maintains its primary operational bases.

Workshop participants recognised that the West's response to AQ, whether or not it wanes, will continue to have direct repercussions on the future of AQ. Regardless of its future operational profile, be it strong or weak, AQ will not (and cannot) accept defeat so long as its strategic purpose is to wage war against the West. For AQ, to admit defeat—however one defines the latter—is to cease to have a reason to exist.

This paper presents the results of the foresight project. A number of important caveats apply to the scenario-building process and to this report. The most important are:

i) **The points of focus set out above apply in all scenarios**, which is to say that the scenarios:
   a. concentrate on the AQ network (ie, AQ Core and its affiliates); and
   b. treat stability and governance in the network's most important operating areas as a major force that will shape its future prospects;

ii) **The scenarios are not intended to predict AQ's future.** They provide a range of credible alternative futures and describe contexts within which to explore the signs and implications of the evolution of AQ to the year 2018;

as such, they constitute an additional tool to support analysts' and decision-makers' understanding of the AQ threat and may inform the long-term allocation of resources by countries facing it.

iii) **The scenarios project out to 2018.** This five-year horizon played a critical role in determining which points of focus emerged as the most essential (eg, stability and governance vs. the long-term implications of transformational political and economic change);

iv) The scenarios are drafted in the present tense. The use of this tense **is not meant to imply inevitability**.

True to the practice of intelligence, this paper does not offer prescriptions to respond to any of the scenarios, a prerogative naturally left to policy-makers. That being said, the participants determined that the second scenario of incremental growth represents the most expected, or likeliest, one. All three scenarios are offered to support further discussions by other AQ observers.

BUILDING THE SCENARIOS: AN ANALYTICAL BACKGROUND

The scenarios presented in this report imagine alternative futures for the AQ network. To understand how AQ could evolve in such different ways, the scenarios are built on the same analytical starting points. Their most basic assumption is that the network will evolve in ways that align with both its external environment and its nature. This assumption centres on three areas of focus: AQ's external environment; AQ's network features; and AQ's character. Descriptions of each focus area are set out below.

THE EXTERNAL ENVIRONMENT

An exhaustive study of the many variables that will influence AQ's external environment over the next five years fell outside the scope of this project. In considering which forces will have the most direct and far-reaching impacts on AQ, participants reflected on the significant extent to which AQ seeks out and is nurtured by unstable or weakly governed spaces. Accordingly, the scenarios hold that the relative stability and governance of the regions in which AQ maintains

its primary physical presence is the variable most likely to affect its future prospects.

Uncertainty surrounds the future stability and governance of AQ's base regions. In the Middle East and North Africa, for example, a wave of unrest that began in early 2011 has ushered in new regimes, sparked violent revolts and given rise to mass protests. Insofar as the forces driving this unrest are common across the regions where AQ is based, so too is the uncertainty they represent.

Uncertainty in AQ's base regions will have a significant effect on its future prospects. It will, for example, affect AQ's popular appeal in those regions and Western countries alike. It will similarly have an impact on AQ's ability to escape (CT) pressures. In particular, it will affect the extent to which regional and Western security services are preoccupied by other security and order concerns (mass violence, intercommunal violence, regime collapse, etc.). Taken together, these effects will have far-reaching consequences for AQ. At a minimum, they will affect its ability to cultivate popular support; attract new recruits; inspire homegrown Western terrorists; acquire new weapons and funding; secure existing safe havens; and reach into new operating theatres.

THE INTERNAL ENVIRONMENT

Determining how the AQ network might be re-shaped in ways that align with both its external environment and its nature requires understanding today's AQ. The network's key features are described below.

Ideology/Goals: AQ holds that the West is waging a crusade against Islam and that it is the religious duty of every Muslim to join in what AQ ideologues term a defensive jihad ("struggle"). Self-appointed as the vanguard of this jihad, AQ's goal is to drive the West out of ancient Muslim lands so as to establish a community of states based on Islamic law and restore the Islamic caliphate. To this end, AQ aims to exploit conflicts between the *ummah* (worldwide Muslim community) on the one hand, and the West and regional "apostate" governments on the other (ie, Muslims vs. the far and near enemies). The pursuit of that objective has fuelled internal debate in a number of AQ affiliates as to the importance to ascribe to global and local "jihad" respectively.

Leadership: AQ's leadership is in flux. CT operations have cost it mid-level leaders throughout the network and many of its most senior leaders, including co-founder Osama bin Laden. It is not yet clear whether AQ's new and emerging leaders will have the operational skill, strategic foresight and personal rapport that lent important strengths to its former leadership cadre.

Structure: The AQ network comprises a core made up of senior leaders and a collection of affiliated groups. It is generally accepted that AQ Core provides ideological guidance to the affiliates, but that the affiliates, borne out of local political realities, control their own logistics and operations. Today's main affiliates already existed when their relationship with AQ Core was established. The AQ groups that may arise from ungoverned spaces in the future may not have the same origins or organisational structure, adding complexity to the AQ network.

Resource Profile: Recruits, funds and safe havens in which to operate are the mainstays of AQ's operational capabilities. Recruits are drawn from local and foreign areas; funding is acquired by a variety of means (including kidnappings, trafficking and donations from supporters in the Gulf and elsewhere); and safe havens are made available by a lack of strong central authority, weak or permissive security services and complicit or repressed local populations.

CENTRAL ASSUMPTIONS

AQ's character will play an important role in determining how its network evolves in tandem with changes in its external environment. Accordingly, the scenarios' analytical foundation included assumptions on AQ's nature. Participants in the workshop posited that AQ:

i) *will retain its global aspirations;*

ii) *will accommodate greater fluidity within its network;*

iii) *might participate in popular political processes—on its own terms;*

iv) *will not accept defeat.*

LOSING THE WAR OF IDEAS
SCENARIO NO. 1: GRADUAL DECLINE

THE EXTERNAL ENVIRONMENT

AQ's future prospects are affected by stability and governance (or lack thereof) in its most significant operating environments.

This scenario assumes that, where local governments are seen to be addressing the causes of instability and weak governance, they benefit from widespread legitimacy and support. By alleviating the forces that drive unrest, these developments reinforce the mainstream political system. They also make it possible for the local security services' CT resources to be allocated to more traditional security and law enforcement concerns. Caught by political forces that clash with its interests, AQ sees a gradual decline in its future prospects.

THE INTERNAL ENVIRONMENT

All aspects of the AQ network are affected by the interplay between its nature and changes in its external environment. The network's key features under this scenario are set out below.

Ideology/Goals

AQ's ideology promotes unity across the network by continuing to instil a common sense of purpose: to defend the *ummah* from near and far enemies alike. Despite consensus on its *raison d'être*, AQ's ideological unity becomes tested as the affiliates respond to popular support for emerging mainstream political institutions. Amongst other reactions, they reinterpret aspects of AQ's ideology in a bid to shore up their local appeal and dampen support for non-violent political life. Because these ideological deviations are not perfectly compatible with one another, they cause growing tensions across the network. As the AQ ideology is further diluted, its ability to unify and inspire operatives across the network starts to weaken.

Leadership

AQ's leadership sees that new pressures have an impact on its already stressed unity. The main causes of its current tensions are three-fold: i) the transition from a hierarchical organisation to a network system has eroded AQ's lines of authority; ii) the killing of Osama bin Laden has deprived AQ of his unique authority; and, iii) the loss of mid-level leaders across the network has destroyed the personal ties that first brought AQ together.

The forces driving AQ leaders apart are exacerbated by efforts to reverse AQ's declining fortunes. For example, the affiliates magnify ideological incompatibilities that emerge as they reinterpret AQ messaging to suit their local interests. They also grow more disconnected from one another as their efforts to evade CT strikes lead them to step back from intra-network activities that can be tracked by security services. Taken together, these old and new fault lines make AQ's leadership more susceptible to the corrosive effects of interpersonal competitions and antagonisms.

Structure

Strategies intended to reverse AQ's declining appeal and capabilities accelerate its decentralisation. In particular, tensions emerge across the network—and within the affiliates—as leaders struggle over how to arrest their decline. The result are a proliferation of small break-away factions. Some uphold AQ's ideology and strategies; some modify them; and some selectively parrot them. Distinguishing the believers from the pragmatists and the opportunists—and anticipating the shifting operational alliances and antagonisms between them—has become a complicated task for local authorities and Western governments.

Resources

Popular support for mainstream efforts to correct the causes of instability and weak governance has a negative impact on AQ's resource profile. It generally dampens the civil unrest that had fed AQ's popular appeal and bolsters the local security services that target AQ's funds and safe havens. It does not, however, leave AQ destroyed by a lack of basic resources. Residual political and economic grievances, as well as the network's own resourcefulness, continue to give AQ the opportunities it needs to ensure its organisational survival.

IMPLICATIONS

Where governments in AQ's base regions are seen to be addressing the causes of instability and weak governance, they set in motion forces that conflict with AQ's interests. AQ's efforts to counter those forces seed small but growing deviations within its ideology, fuel tensions amongst its leaders and amplify the existing decentralisation pressures in its network. Although these dynamics further erode its abilities to penetrate Western defences and execute sophisticated attacks, AQ does not accept defeat. It shifts its focus to small rudimentary attacks and makes it a priority to increase their frequency. Its strategy is straightforward: it continues to inspire homegrown terrorists in Western countries and strike transitory alliances with its break-away factions and fellow travellers in the regions where it is based. The narrative directed towards AQ audiences is simple and compelling: more AQ-linked groups + more attacks on AQ's enemies = more success for AQ.

Because AQ's gradual decline can be re-packaged as a success, Western countries risk mistaking it for victory. If they respond with a new wave of intensive CT operations, their approach can inadvertently validate AQ's worldview, breed hostility toward its mainstream regional partners and stifle productive economic growth. With a little help from AQ propagandists, the West therefore empowers AQ.

Alternatively, the West does nothing to reinvigorate AQ, the network's refusal to accept defeat sees it split between those who remain committed to violent jihad and those who join mainstream politics in a bid to remain relevant. To the extent that anti-Western sentiment continues to resonate amongst the general population, AQ's political members and supporters still succeed in embedding the network's extremist views in state institutions. AQ's hostility towards the West is then expressed through both terror attacks and indirect state-to-state tensions.

EXPANSION AND DIFFUSION OF THE "AQ BRAND"
SCENARIO NO. 2: INCREMENTAL GROWTH

THE EXTERNAL ENVIRONMENT

AQ's future prospects is affected by stability and governance (or lack thereof) in its most significant operating environments.

This scenario assumes that, where local governments are slow and/or uncertain in their efforts to correct the causes of instability and weak governance, their legitimacy is coloured by frustration and disillusionment. These conditions legitimise AQ arguments that the system is monopolised by small groups of corrupt elites and cannot be changed by popular protest. They also nurture resentment that the system cannot (or will not) correct widespread poverty, inequality and lack of opportunity. Together, these dynamics give rise to more lawlessness and violence. Local security services eventually find themselves preoccupied by other security and order concerns (growing civil unrest, regime instability, etc.), and as a result relieve their CT pressures on the AQ network.

AQ capitalises on the opportunities sparked by popular frustration with the mainstream system to popularise its worldview and fortify its capabilities. The results are slow but steady improvements in AQ's future prospects.

THE INTERNAL ENVIRONMENT

The scenarios hold that AQ is re-shaped by dynamic interplays between its character and its external environment. The network's key features under this scenario are set out below.

Ideology/Goals

Because AQ's worldview is essential to its *raison d'être*, AQ Core and the affiliates all continue to have a stake in upholding it. However, the affiliates also face growing incentives to reinterpret AQ messages in ways that position them to exploit local grievances, as has already been observed for example in West Africa,

the Horn of Africa and the Sinai Peninsula. Multiple affiliates make adaptations suited to their unique local conditions, resulting in ideological divergences across the network and a growing number of debates as to which near and/or far enemies AQ should seek to strike.

Leadership

AQ's leadership becomes more unpredictable as growth opportunities, high turnover and the need to replace a senior cadre decimated by CT operations together usher in a new leadership cohort. As popular frustration with mainstream politics creates new opportunities for AQ affiliates, the next generation of leaders sees its authority tied to its operational performance, rather than to its ideological credentials or concerns for network-wide strategy. This focus on local performance encourages the affiliates to act more autonomously and opportunistically. It also degrades the core's already declining influence over the affiliates and, with time, downgrades it from a central ideological authority to one of several common leadership nodes. Together, these overlapping forces cause the network to become less cohesive and predictable. Yesterday's unified, shrewd and forward-looking leadership is replaced by a more fractured, impetuous and short-sighted one.

Structure

Growth opportunities reinforce AQ's ongoing decentralisation. In particular, growth driven by unrest sees newly formed rebel groups align themselves with AQ in cases where collaboration brings mutual benefits. As these tactical alliances evolve into ongoing relationships, the AQ network expands. However, to the extent that such growth is based on, and held together by, opportunistic collaboration, it accelerates the decentralisation of authority within the network.

Growth opportunities also reinforce AQ's decentralisation by creating a situation where the supply of skilled operatives fall short of demand. This supply-and-demand dynamic encourages skilled operatives to act as freelancers who move at will across the network, as happened in Mali. Over time, their movement speeds knowledge and skill transfers within the network and, in so doing, accelerates AQ's decentralisation by reducing its internal dependencies. The result is that AQ Core, AQI, AQIM, AQAP, AQEA and their different manifestations act as a flat, loose but efficient network.

Resources
Slow and uncertain efforts to correct instability and weak governance benefit AQ's resource profile. For example, they position AQ to: i) capitalise on popular frustrations to spread its ideology and attract new recruits; ii) take advantage of growing lawlessness to generate additional funding from kidnappings, trafficking, etc.; and iii) exploit new security vacuums to establish safe havens in weak and failing states, such as Mali, Syria, Libya and Afghanistan.

IMPLICATIONS

Incremental growth gradually changes the threats posed by AQ. They become less predictable as AQ leaders become more autonomous and opportunistic, and they become more potent as AQ avails itself of new weapons and recruits, new funding sources and new safe havens. Moreover, the threats become more numerous as AQ-linked groups proliferate across AQ's base regions and possibly elsewhere. Lastly, every one of these changes in AQ's threat profile will be intensified where growing numbers of weakly governed spaces and failing states encourage Western sympathisers to become more active and create opportunities for AQ operatives to slip into refugee flows to Western countries.

Changes in the West's CT posture can amplify the new AQ threat: complacency bred by past CT successes and the incremental pace of AQ's growth; CT cutbacks caused by recessionary pressures; and troop withdrawals aligned with pre-set mission end-dates create new intelligence blind spots for the West while reducing CT pressures on AQ. The result is severe: the West grows increasingly vulnerable at the very time that AQ grows incrementally more capable.

TOWARDS STATE POWER
SCENARIO NO. 3: RAPID GROWTH

THE EXTERNAL ENVIRONMENT

AQ's future prospects are affected by stability and governance (or lack thereof) in its most significant operating environments.

This scenario assumes that the causes of instability and weak governance in the regions where AQ maintains its primary operational bases grow worse. The dynamics are similar across AQ's base regions: political tensions are aggravated by conflicting visions of the state, personal animosities and deliberate acts of sabotage; and economic prospects are undermined by stagnant growth, depleted reserves, and swelling deficits. To the extent that these pressures cause widespread instability and weaken local governance, they fortify AQ. They perpetuate the extremist views on which AQ thrives by, for example, leaving ultra conservative Islamist organisations to fulfill basic needs. They replenish the pools of disenfranchised youth from which AQ draws its recruits and expand the lawless spaces in which AQ finds its havens. Moreover, they relieve CT pressures on the AQ network by overwhelming local security services with more immediate concerns (state collapse, regime survival, mass violence, etc.).

Where the causes of instability and weak governance worsen, AQ's prospects improves. Where their growth is stark, AQ's growth is rapid.

THE INTERNAL ENVIRONMENT

The interplay between AQ's nature and its external environment affects all aspects of the network. The network's key features under this scenario are set out below.

Ideology/Goals

Aware that its worldview supports its mission, AQ continues to hold that the West and "apostate" local governments are at war with Islam. In addition to serving a strategic purpose, this point of view also serves a practical one: it provides ideological cover for selecting targets in line with matter-of-fact

considerations and, in so doing, allows the affiliates' diverse local interests to co-exist in the same network. AQ's worldview nonetheless sees points of disagreement emerge, as the rush to capitalise on new opportunities and the decline in AQ Core's central influence together encourage the affiliates to adapt their messaging and tactics in ways that exploit highly local conditions. For example, some members of the network condemn sectarian violence while others legitimise it where it makes tactical sense to do so (eg, in Syria). However, the network does not fracture on ideological grounds; support for AQ's overarching worldview and the very tangible benefits that come from belonging to a rapidly growing network provide strong incentives to resolve (or ignore) ideological differences.

Leadership

AQ's leadership finds itself under greater stress. Amongst other pressures, its unity is already strained by the declining influence of AQ Core in Pakistan and the increasing autonomy of AQ affiliates (particularly AQIM and AQAP). Although these pressures are reinforced by the tensions that arise as AQ attempts to seize new growth opportunities, they do not cause ruptures. Instead, they are offset by unifying forces. In particular, AQ Core still promotes network-wide cohesion and AQ's vision continues to accommodate some ideological divergence. Perhaps most importantly, AQ's rapidly multiplying growth dividends (including a wealth of new resources and an increasingly skilled leadership cadre) generate powerful enticements to remain part of a strong and united AQ. Caught between these push-pull forces, AQ's leadership sees its unity grow more stressed—but it does not break up.

Structure

AQ's growth is opportunistic. Its principal strategies include moving into spaces that failing states can no longer govern (eg, Libya), striking alliances with fellow travellers who can provide logistical benefits (eg, in Iraq, Syria, Kenya, Tanzania and Yemen), and embedding itself in resurgent jihad movements (eg, in the Caucasus, Central Asia and Southeast Asia). In more extreme cases, AQ strives to take *de facto* control of failed governments. Its targets range from low-value governments responsible for impoverished territories (eg, Afghanistan, some states in West Africa and Yemen) to high-value ones responsible for countries armed with weapons of mass destruction (eg, Syria and Pakistan). Without exception, spaces controlled by AQ (using proxies) are ruled according to the most severe interpretations of Islamic law.

Growth transforms AQ's organisational structure. Its geographic breadth and increasingly complex array of AQ-affiliated, AQ-linked and AQ-run groups drive it to build more defined network structures under each of its affiliates. As the same pressures that affect AQ's 2013 structure are replicated in its new one, AQ's organisational cohesion becomes strained but not broken.

Resources

The worse the instability and governance in AQ's base regions, the better the results for AQ's resource profile. Worsening local conditions, ongoing drone strikes and new opportunities attract support for AQ from individual Islamist extremists and some diasporic communities. They also cause increases in the number of new recruits drawn from both the regions where AQ is based and Western countries. In addition, widespread lawlessness, instability and unrest make it possible for AQ to cultivate new criminal funding sources, acquire sophisticated weapons smuggled out of weak states and establish more safe havens. At the extreme, puppet governments run by AQ start giving the network control over invaluable resources, including military installations, weapons depots, laboratories, banks, commercial enterprises and strategic natural resources, including oil.

IMPLICATIONS

Where the instability and weak governance in AQ's base regions is severe, it drives the forces that power AQ: violence, poverty, security vacuums and regime collapse. It pushes AQ's popular appeal to record levels, expands its resource wealth in unprecedented ways and fuels its growth. Under these conditions, AQ finds itself having a larger and much more active presence in a greatly expanded number of sanctuaries. It also exercises effective control over states holding weapons of mass destruction. Armed with chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear (CBRN) deterrents to CT activities, AQ poses an entirely new threat to global security.

Western governments find themselves confronting an immensely more complex and severe AQ threat at a time when recessionary pressures, public fatigue with CT operations and complacency bred by more than a decade of CT success are creating strong domestic demands to step back. Stop-gap solutions to reconcile these conflicting pressures include a continued shift from human intelligence operations to technical solutions, and from large-scale military interventions to

strategic strikes by special operation forces. Over the longer term, the West seeks out new opportunities to take advantage of AQ's most likely vulnerabilities: local resistance to AQ control driven by resilient social structures and loyalties; internal disagreements amongst AQ factions fuelled by competing personalities, ideologies and tactics; and public-opinion volatility in AQ's base regions caused by acute political repression and economic hardship.

AL-QAEDA CENTRAL AND AL-QAEDA IN IRAQ IN 2018

ASSUMPTIONS

"Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose"—the more it changes, the more it's the same thing—goes Jean-Baptiste Alphonse Karr's famous 19th century epigram. The same may be said of current analyses of what is variously called the Core Al-Qaeda or the Al-Qaeda Core, Al-Qaeda Central, or the Al-Qaeda Senior Leadership (AQSL). For example, in a speech delivered in April 2012 at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, John O. Brennan, *then Deputy National Security Advisor for Homeland Security and Counterterrorism* and Assistant to the President, declared, "For the first time since this fight began, we can look ahead and envision a world in which the al-Qaeda core is simply no longer relevant."[1] A couple of months later, then US Secretary of Defence Leon Panetta affirmed, "We've not only impacted on their leadership, we've impacted on their capability to provide any kind of command and control in terms of operations"[2]—building on his previous assertion from summer 2011 when, shortly after he assumed office, Panetta proclaimed, "We're in reach of strategically defeating al-Qaeda."[3] The Defence Secretary's more recent statement clearly echoed that of President Barack Obama himself who, on the first anniversary of bin Laden's killing, proclaimed, "The goal that I set—to defeat al-Qaeda and deny it a chance to rebuild—is now within our reach."[4]

The evidence supporting these claims is, admittedly, compelling. Osama bin Laden, the co-founder and leader of Al-Qaeda, is dead. Key lieutenants like Ilyas Kashmiri, described by the most recently released US State Department analysis of terrorism trends as "one of the most capable terrorist operatives in South Asia," was killed by a US drone strike in Pakistan the following month,[5] as was the movement's reported number two leader, Atiyah abd al-Rahman, in August 2011, and his successor, Abu Yahya al-Libi, in June 2012.[6] The fourfold increase in targeted assassinations undertaken by the Obama Administration[7] has thus to date killed at least 34 key Al-Qaeda leaders in Pakistan,[8] as well as some 235 fighters,[9] thus setting the core organisation, in the words of a recent US State Department analysis, "on a path of decline that will be difficult to reverse."[10] This general assessment also reflects the views of many prominent American pundits, academics and analysts.[11]

The fundamental argument presented in this paper, however, advocates a more cautious, even agnostic, approach. Although one cannot deny the vast inroads made against Core Al-Qaeda in recent years as a result of these developments described above, this paper nonetheless argues that the long-established nucleus of the Al-Qaeda organisation has proven itself to be as resilient as it is formidable. For more than a decade, it has withstood arguably the greatest international onslaught directed against a terrorist organisation in history. Further, it has consistently shown itself capable of adapting and adjusting to even the most consequential countermeasures directed against it, having, despite all odds, survived for nearly a quarter century, as well.

In this respect, the Arab Spring, and especially the ongoing unrest and protracted civil war in Syria, have endowed the Al-Qaeda brand and, by extension, the core organisation, with new relevance and status that, depending on the future course of events in both that country and the surrounding region, could potentially resuscitate Core Al-Qaeda's admittedly waning fortunes. The fact that the Al-Qaeda Core seems to enjoy an unmolested existence from authorities in Pakistan, coupled with the forthcoming withdrawal of US forces and ISAF troops from Afghanistan by 2014, further suggests that Core Al-Qaeda may well regain the breathing space and cross-border physical sanctuary needed to ensure its continued existence for at least the next five years.

Throughout its history, the oxygen that Al-Qaeda depends upon has ineluctably been its possession of, or access to, physical sanctuary and safe haven. In the turbulent wake of the Arab Spring and the political upheavals and instability that have followed, Al-Qaeda convincingly has the potential to transform toeholds established in the Levant and perhaps in the Sinai and in both North and West Africa into footholds—thus complementing its existing outposts in Pakistan, Afghanistan, Yemen, and Somalia.

It must also be noted that the Al-Qaeda Core has stubbornly survived despite predictions or conventional wisdom to the contrary. Hence, at the risk of stating the obvious, Al-Qaeda's obituary has been written many times before, only to have been proven to be presumptuously premature wishful thinking. "Al-Qa'ida's Top Primed To Collapse, US Says," trumpeted a *Washington Post* headline two weeks after Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, the mastermind behind the September 11, 2001 attacks and then the movement's "number three," was arrested in March 2003. "I believe the tide has turned in terms of Al-Qa'ida," Congressman Porter J. Goss, then chairman of the US House of Representatives Intelligence

Committee and himself a former CIA case officer who became its director a year later, was quoted in that same article. "We've got them nailed," an unidentified intelligence expert also boasted nine years ago, before more expansively declaring that "we're close to dismantling them."[12]

Identically upbeat assessments were voiced following the nearly bloodless capture of Baghdad the following month and the failure of Al-Qaeda to make good on threats of renewed attacks in retaliation for the US-led invasion.[13] Citing Bush Administration sources, an article in the *Washington Times* on 24 April 2003, for instance, reported the prevailing view in official Washington that Al-Qaeda's "failure to carry out a successful strike during the US-led military campaign to topple Saddam Hussein has raised questions about their ability to carry out major new attacks."[14] Then, in rapid succession came the March 2004 commuter train bombings in Madrid; the suicide attacks against London transportation targets the following year; and, among the most serious of the various post-9/11 Al-Qaeda Central commanded plots, the planned in-flight suicide bombings of seven American and Canadian passenger aircraft in August 2006.[15]

The airlines plot is especially instructive in this context. Rather than selecting the softer, more accessible targets like subway and commuter trains, hotels and tourist destinations, which conventional wisdom at the time held was all an arguably seriously degraded Al-Qaeda was capable of, the intended attack was directed against perhaps the most hardened target set in the post-September 11, 2001, environment: commercial aviation. This development thus called into question some of the most fundamental assumptions about Core Al-Qaeda's capabilities and intentions and—not least—the ability to deter it. In this latter respect, Al-Qaeda's leadership apparently was completely unfazed by the succession of intelligence successes that led first to the arrest of the plot's initial commander, Abu Faraj al-Libi, in May 2005, and then to the death of his successor, Hamza Rabia, in a US drone strike just five months later. Such was the movement's determination to attack despite its allegedly catastrophic condition that, these presumably fatal setbacks (eg, one leader in custody and another dead) notwithstanding, it reached into its supposedly exhausted bench of core fighters and appointed the late Abu Ubaydah al-Masri to press ahead with the operation.

Not two years later, though, similar assertions of Al-Qaeda Central's demise were being voiced. Juan Zarate, the Bush Administration's Deputy National Security Advisor for Combating Terrorism and one of the most perceptive

and knowledgeable observers of the entire Al-Qaeda phenomenon, offered an unusually nuanced and balanced assessment of the movement and the core leadership in a speech presented in April 2008. Carefully calibrating recent progress in the war on terrorism against remaining challenges, Zarate nonetheless drew attention to a "number of important developments that signal that Al-Qaeda and the movement it represents are under greater stress and finding more opposition to its program, in particular by Muslims affected directly by Al-Qaeda's tactics."[16] Zarate's remarks were amplified two weeks later by an anonymous senior American counterterrorism official quoted in an interview with London's *Daily Telegraph*:. "[T]he end of the global threat al-Qaeda poses," he stated, "is now as visible as it is foreseeable."[17] Then, there was the statement by Ryan Crocker, the then US Ambassador to Iraq, who told reporters on a visit to the Shi'a holy cities of Najaf and Karbala that May, "You are not going to hear me say that al-Qaeda is defeated, but they've never been closer to defeat than they are now."[18] And, finally, under a front-page headline in the *Washington Post*, "US Cites Big Gains Against Al-Qaeda," then CIA Director Michael Hayden ticked off a list of indicators that, he argued, portended Al-Qaeda's imminent demise: "Near strategic defeat of Al-Qaeda in Iraq. Near strategic defeat for Al-Qaeda in Saudi Arabia. Significant setbacks for Al-Qaeda globally…as a lot of the Islamic world pushes back on their form of Islam."[19]

At the time, these views fit neatly with the prevailing consensus among government officials, academics and pundits alike that Al-Qaeda had ceased to exist as an organisational entity and had become nothing more than a hollow shell—an ideology without an organisation to advance it—and a leaderless entity of disparate individuals unconnected to any central authority. Bin Laden was said to be completely estranged from the movement he created, living in a remote cave, isolated from his fighters, sympathizers and supporters, and unable to exercise any meaningful role in the movement's operations and future trajectory. The threat, it was argued, had therefore become primarily "bottom up" and not "top down"—to the extent that terrorist organisations themselves and the command and control functions that they had traditionally exercised were said to no longer matter. Instead, it was argued, the threat now came from self-radicalised, self-selected "lone wolves" and "bunches of guys" and not from actual, existing identifiable terrorist organisations.[20]

Then, the plot to stage simultaneous suicide attacks on the New York City subway system, to coincide with the eighth anniversary of the September 11, 2001 attacks, came to light the following year. The ringleader, an Afghan-born

Green Card holder who lived in Queens named Najibullah Zazi, testified that both he and two fellow conspirators had been trained at an Al-Qaeda camp in Pakistan. Three senior Core Al-Qaeda commanders—the late Rashid Rauf and Saleh al-Somali, who were respectively killed in US drone strikes in 2008 and 2009, together with Adnan El Shukrijumah, who is still at large—had overseen and directed the plot, which was also linked to two other ambitious sets of attacks planned for April 2009 in Manchester, England, and July 2010 in Scandinavia.[21]

May 2010 brought additional refutation of the "bottom up" argument when a naturalized US citizen of Pakistani birth named Faisal Shahzad nearly succeeded in staging a massive car bombing in the heart of New York City's Times Square. Shahzad had been recruited by a close Core Al-Qaeda ally, the Tehrik-e-Taliban (TTP or "Pakistani Taliban"), which had also trained him in bomb-making at a camp in North Waziristan before sending him back to the US on this mission.[22]

In sum, the same arguments made about the irrelevance or impending demise of Core Al-Qaeda today have all been heard before—and have consistently proven mistaken. Given that virtually every major terrorist attack or plot against either the US or the U.K. (and indeed other European countries) during the period between 2002 and 2009[23] was known either to have emanated from Core Al-Qaeda or from allies and associates acting on its behalf—when Core Al-Qaeda had supposedly ceased to exist—such assessments sound a cautionary note with regard to the similarly optimistic claims made in many contemporary analyses of the Al-Qaeda Core's longevity and supposed irrelevance.

CAPACITY

The prevailing consensus that the Al-Qaeda Core is poised on the brink of collapse seemed to acquire greater weight in May 2012 when the US Military Academy's Combating Terrorism Center (CTC) published 17 documents seized at bin Laden's Abbottabad villa during the previous year's raid.[24] "Osama bin Laden's last words show dark days for al-Qaeda" was typical of the news coverage afforded the documents' release.[25] Indeed, the CTC's conclusion based on this thimbleful of documents, from which the media largely drew for its reporting, was unequivocal:

> The relationship between what has been labelled "Al-Qaeda Central" (AQC) under the leadership of bin Laden is not in sync on the operational level with its so-called "affiliates." Bin Laden enjoyed little control over either groups affiliated with Al-Qaeda in name (eg, AQAP or AQI/ISI) or so-called "fellow travellers" such as the TTP.[26]

In the rush to draw inferences from this minuscule sample of the thousands of documents removed from bin Laden's lair by the US Navy SEALs who killed the Al-Qaeda leader, there was no mention of the starkly different interpretation of the materials that was offered by Obama Administration officials shortly after the raid. For example, an anonymous senior US official quoted in *ProPublica* depicted bin Laden as a hands-on "micro-manager.... "The cumbersome process he had to follow for security reasons," the official had explained," "did not prevent him from playing a role . . . He was down in the weeds as far as best operatives, best targets, best timing."[27]

Intelligence analysts then dissecting bin Laden's diary had reportedly concluded that the movement's preeminent figure had also been involved in "every recent major al-Qaeda threat."[28] These included plots directed against the US, where bin Laden urged his followers to recruit non-Muslims and minorities—especially African Americans and Latinos—for attacks that would target locations in addition to New York City and Los Angeles, but also smaller cities. Striking on significant dates such as July 4 and the 10th anniversary of the September 11, 2001, attacks, and hitting targets such as trains and passenger aircraft, were among his exhortations both to Core Al-Qaeda planners, as well as to operatives in the group's affiliated movements in Yemen, Pakistan, and Somalia, among other places, according to the information released the previous year.[29] According to an account published in the *Washington Post* that month, bin Laden "functioned like a crime boss pulling strings from a prison cell, sending regular messages to his most trusted lieutenants and strategic advice to far-flung franchises, including Al-Qaeda's affiliate in Yemen."[30]

No explanation, however, was offered this past May with the CTC's release of the Abbottabad materials to square these discrepancies. Perhaps doing so risked calling attention to the fact that a close reading of the 17 documents reveals that they are far more ambiguous than portrayed in both the CTC report and accompanying US government statements. For instance, it is significant that, notwithstanding the severe limitations imposed on the Al-Qaeda Core by US intelligence and military operations, especially since the escalation of the

drone program's campaign in 2009, the movement has still been able to expand appreciably beyond its South Asia base. The documents indisputably depict an Al-Qaeda that, in 2011, had an active presence in more places than it did on September 11, 2001.[31] Moreover, in the year since the raid, the movement has been able to expand still further: deeper into West Africa (beyond Nigeria to Mali, Mauritania and Niger) and to the Levant (Syria), as well.

That bin Laden may have been "out of sync" or had fraught relations with the variety of far-flung Al-Qaeda affiliate organisations is therefore not entirely surprising. This was the trade-off he accepted after 2002 to ensure the movement's survival and longevity by devolving power to the local franchises. Nonetheless, bin Laden remained both determined and able to communicate his wishes to Al-Qaeda's growing stable of associates. Getting them to listen was of course a problem familiar to any manager coping with rapid expansion. Admittedly, this led to uneven relations with some of Al-Qaeda's affiliates and associates because of the cumbersome and elongated communications loop. And, at times they spurned his advice and entreaties.[32] But it should be remembered that Al-Qaeda itself established none of these franchises. All had already existed before choosing to align themselves with Al-Qaeda; hence, as independent entities, it is unreasonable to assume that they would necessarily fall into lock step with all of bin Laden's wishes or dictates.[33]

Nonetheless, the picture that emerges from the seized Arabic-language documents is of a leader involved in both Al-Qaeda's day-to-day operations and long-term strategy.[34] Ever the policy wonk, opining on topics as diverse as the Arab Spring and the declining US economy, bin Laden also retained his penchant for attempting to micromanage—however unresponsive his franchises and affiliates may or may not have been. In actual fact, the documents portray the affiliates as responsive to bin Laden on the most important, pressing issues regarding either personnel or strategy. The extent of his influence is perhaps best illustrated by bin Laden's ability to block both the promotion of the late Anwar al-Awlaqi within Al-Qaeda's Yemeni affiliate, AQAP (Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula),[35] and the formalisation of relations between the movement's Somali arm, al-Shabaab, with Core Al-Qaeda.[36]

From bin Laden documents leaked to the British press but curiously missing from the West Point CTC's trove,[37] we also know that, as far back as 2003, bin Laden had taken an interest in expanding Al-Qaeda's operations to West Africa, and in fact was in direct contact with leaders of Nigeria's Boko Haram

group.[38] We also know that both he and his successor and co-founder of Al-Qaeda, Ayman al-Zawahiri, maintained close relations with both the Afghan and Pakistani Taliban. Indeed, both men reportedly regularly conferred with Mullah Omar and discussed the opportunities that the eventual US and ISAF withdrawal from Afghanistan would present to their respective organisations.[39]

Much has already been made in previous document leaks of bin Laden's musings about the need to rebrand Al-Qaeda in light of its waning influence and tarnished image in the Muslim world as a result of its affiliates killing more of their co-religionists than their declared enemies. But a careful reading of the declassified documents presents a more nuanced understanding of bin Laden's preoccupation with this issue. His concerns in fact centered on his belief that the Western media and Al-Qaeda's enemies were mis-portraying the movement by focusing only on its violent side and ignoring its political goals and aspirations. Bin Laden thus sought a new name for the movement that would more accurately reflect its ideological pretensions and self-appointed role as defender of Muslims everywhere.[40] This calculated assessment of Al-Qaeda's outreach shortcomings is thus very different from the desperate handwringing described in news accounts of the documents.

Perhaps the most remarkable communication, however, is one dated 27 August 2010. In it, bin Laden expresses his concerns for the safety of his fighters and followers in Pakistan: not because they might be arrested or detained by the authorities, but because of the torrential rains and flooding then afflicting that country.[41] The Al-Qaeda leader, accordingly, was more fearful that his men might be affected by the weather than by any effort of the Pakistani government to apprehend them. This assertion alone speaks volumes about how amenable he and his minions found their refuge in Pakistan—a comfort level that is unlikely to have changed in the two years since bin Laden was killed.

Moreover, there is little in the documents that suggests that it was terribly difficult for Al-Qaeda fighters to travel from Iran to Pakistan—or, for that matter, between Afghanistan and Pakistan.[42] And there is no indication that, once in Pakistan, they had any trouble traversing Baluchistan en route to the Federally Administered Tribal Areas or North-West Frontier Province, two of the movement's favorite haunts. Given the continuing antipathy between Pakistan and the US and the absence of any indication of a change in this laissez-faire policy of the Pakistani government toward Al-Qaeda since bin Laden's death, there is no reason to believe that the core's freedom of movement has been inhibited in any meaningful way.

Finally, despite Core Al-Qaeda's alleged abject decrepitude and the suppositions about bin Laden somehow being "out of touch" (as well as "out of sync"), he nonetheless laid out a compelling strategy for Al-Qaeda's survival that the broad movement appears to be pursuing today. Continuing to attack the US was only one step in his strategic plan, which focused on:

- Attriting and enervating America so that a weakened US would be forced out of Muslim lands and therefore have neither the will nor the capability to intervene;

- Taking over and controlling territory, creating the physical sanctuaries and safe havens that are Al-Qaeda's lifeblood; and

- Declaring "emirates" in these liberated lands that would be safe from US and Western intervention because of their collective enfeeblement.[43]

Although it may be tempting to dismiss bin Laden's grand plans and ambitious strategy for the movement, as Mary Habeck cogently notes, "No al-Qaeda affiliate or partner (including the Taliban, al-Qaeda in Iraq, or the Shabaab) has been deposed from power by an uprising of the local population alone. They have needed outside intervention in order to expel the insurgents, even when the people have hated al-Qaeda's often brutal rule."[44]

Two salient conclusions thus emerge from this overview of the Al-Qaeda Core in light of the released Abbottabad documents. First, one can draw valid inferences from the documents that are at odds with the conventional wisdom or at least the manner in which other analyses have interpreted the documents. Second, if this contrarian view is plausible (which this author certainly believes it to be), the Al-Qaeda Core's demise is neither ordained nor imminent—at least based on the publicly released evidence. Rather, one can make a reasonable argument that Core Al-Qaeda has:

- a well-established sanctuary in Pakistan that functions without great hindrance and that is poised to expand across the border into Afghanistan as the US military and ISAF continue to withdraw from that country, until the complete drawdown set for 2014;

- a deeper bench than has often been posited (or at least has been shown to be deeper at various critical junctures in the past when the Core Al-Qaeda's demise had been proclaimed);[45]

- a defined and articulated strategy for the future that it is presumably still pursuing;

- a highly capable leader in al-Zawahiri who, over the past year—despite predictions to the contrary—has been able not only to keep the movement alive, but also to expand its brand and forge new alliances (particularly in West African countries); and

- a well-honed, long-established dexterity that enables it to be as opportunistic as it has been instrumental, that is capable of identifying and exploiting whatever new opportunities for expansion and consolidation may present themselves.

All this suggests that the Al-Qaeda Core is extremely likely to exist in 2017 much as it existed—despite predictions and assessments to the contrary—five years ago in 2007. Admittedly, it is impossible to know what shape, strength and dimensions the Core will possess five years hence. That, as the next section of this report argues, will depend on the outcome of current events principally in Syria and Iraq, but also in the North African and other Middle Eastern countries profoundly affected by the Arab Spring.

CHANGE DRIVERS

As the preceding discussion argues, while bin Laden's death inflicted a crushing blow on Al-Qaeda, it is still not clear that it has necessarily been a lethal one. He left behind a resilient movement that, though seriously weakened, has nonetheless been expanding and consolidating its control in new and far-flung locales. Bin Laden also created a core organisation that, despite a decade of withering onslaught and attrition, continues to demonstrate its ability to:

- preserve a still compelling brand;

- replenish its ranks (including those of its key leaders);

- project a message that still finds an audience and adherents in disparate parts of the globe, however modest that audience may perhaps be; and

- pursue a strategy that continues to inform both the movement's and the core's operations and activities, and that today is effectively championed by al-Zawahiri.

In this respect, since 2002, Al-Qaeda has embraced a grand plan for itself that was defined as much by al-Zawahiri as bin Laden. It is a plan that deliberately (and successfully) transformed it into a de-centralized, networked, transnational movement rather than the single monolithic entity Al-Qaeda formerly was.[46] In the midst of the group's expulsion from, and defeat in, Afghanistan almost 12 years ago, al-Zawahiri charted a way forward for the movement—at a moment, it is worth recalling, when everyone else believed it was on the brink of annihilation. His treatise, published in the London-based Arabic language newspaper *al Sharq al-Aswat* in December 2001, and titled "*Knights Under the Prophet's Banner*", explained how "small groups could frighten the Americans" and their allies. It equally presciently described how "[t]he jihad movement must patiently build its structure until it is well established. It must pool enough resources and supporters and devise enough plans to fight the battle at the time and arena that it chooses."[47] And, it was Zawahiri, after all, who over 20 years ago articulated Al-Qaeda's enduring strategy in terms of "far" and "near" enemies. The US, of course, was the "far enemy," whose defeat, he maintained, was a prerequisite to the elimination of the "near enemy"—the corrupt, reprobate and authoritarian anti-Islamic regimes in the Middle East, Central Asia, South Asia and South East Asia that could not otherwise remain in power without American support. In light of the Arab Spring, that strategy has now assumed almost a hybrid character,[48] whereby the movement by necessity has focused almost entirely on the "near enemy" and local struggles, while still remaining characteristically poised to take advantage of any opportunity to attack the "far enemy" that may present itself. This dual embrace of "near" and "far" enemy priorities was perhaps best demonstrated by the most recent "underwear bomber" plot involving an agent of the British Secret Intelligence Service (SIS, or MI6) who was able to infiltrate into the highest command structure of AQAP, which again leapt at the opportunity to strike at a "far enemy" commercial airline target despite the group's preoccupation with fighting the Yemeni government—the "near enemy."[49]

By the same token, it is often heard that, much like bin Laden's killing, the Arab Spring has sounded Al-Qaeda's death knell.[50] However, while the mostly non-violent, mass protests of the Arab Spring were successful in overturning hated despots and thus appeared to discredit Al-Qaeda's longstanding message that only violence and jihad could achieve the same ends, in the 18 months since these dramatic developments commenced, evidence has repeatedly come to light of Al-Qaeda's ability to take advantage of the instability and upheaval in these same countries to re-assert its relevance and attempt to revive its waning fortunes.[51]

Moreover, while the Arab Spring has transformed governance across North Africa and the Middle East, it has had little effect on the periphery of that geographic expanse. The continued antipathy in Pakistan toward the US, coupled with the increasing activity of militant groups there—most of whom are already closely affiliated with Core Al-Qaeda—has, for instance, largely undermined the progress achieved in recent years against terrorism in South Asia. Further, the effects of the Arab Spring in Yemen, for instance, have clearly benefitted AQAP at the expense of the chronically weak central government in that country. AQAP in fact has been able to expand its reach considerably, seizing and controlling more territory, gaining new adherents and supporters, and continuing to innovate tactically as it labors to extend its attack capabilities beyond the Arabian Peninsula. Although al-Shabaab has been weakened in Somalia as a result of its expulsion from the capital, Mogadishu, over a year ago and the deaths of two key Core Al-Qaeda who had both embedded in the group and had enhanced appreciably its terrorist capabilities,[52] al-Shabaab nonetheless still maintains a stranglehold over the southern part of the country, where a terrible drought and famine threaten the lives of hundreds of thousands of people.

Meanwhile, the instability and disorder generated by the Arab Spring have created new opportunities for Al-Qaeda and its allies in the region to regroup and reorganize. Indeed, the number of failed or failing states or ungoverned spaces now variously found in the Sahel, in the Sinai, in parts of Syria and elsewhere has in fact increased in the aftermath of the changes witnessed across North Africa and the Middle East since 2011.

In no place is this clearer or more consequential than in Syria. The priority that Core Al-Qaeda has attached to Syria may be seen in the special messages conveyed in February and June 2012 respectively by al-Zawahiri and the late

Abu Yahya al-Libi in support of the uprising against the regime of Syrian President Bashir Assad and calling upon Muslims in Turkey, Iraq, Jordan, and Lebanon to do everything within their power to assist in the overthrow of Syria's hated minority Alawite rulers.[53]

According to U.S Intelligence analysts who regularly monitor the most relevant and important password-protected / access-controlled jihadi websites, the leading thread for months in the top three sites—al-Shumukh al-Islam, al-Fida' and Ansar al-Mujahideen—has been Syria.[54] Typical of these was the 14 February 2012 message posted on al-Fida' that described Syria as presenting an ideal opportunity for mujahideen ("holy warriors") who missed the Afghan and Iraqi jihads. "Since the launch of the Syrian revolution and since the barbaric Nusayri [Alawite] regime began killing our people there," it stated:

> [T]he mujahideen, and praise and gratitude belong to Allah, took the initiative to help those weak ones in the East and West of the earth. We ask Allah to grant them success in liberating the Muslims in Syria from the disbelieving regime. There must be weapons to stop the harm of these aggressors. The ummah will not get out of humiliation and weakness except through Jihad.[55]

Another message, presumably from a front-line fighter who had answered that call, described how "[t]hese attacks in Syria remind me of my time in Iraq."[56] And, in March, a new e-journal, *Balagh* ("Message"), appeared from a group calling itself the Levant News Battalion, and contained religious exhortations to overthrow al-Assad and his Alawite cronies. It was posted on the al-Shumukh al-Islam online forum.[57] Pleas for financial aid to support the mujahideen fighting in Syria have also regularly appeared on this same site.[58]

Al-Qaeda's interest in Syria is neither recent nor ephemeral. As the Council of Foreign Relation's Ed Husain pointed out in his seminal article on the subject, "The territory in the Middle East that Al-Qaeda covets most is of course Saudi Arabia, but Syria is next on the list." Indeed, Syria is not known by the name Syria to Al-Qaeda and its minions but rather as al-Bilaad al-Shaam[59]—"The Land of the Levantine People"—treasured Muslim territory that was once administered by the Turkish Ottoman Empire as a single, unitary entity encompassing present-day Syria, Lebanon, Jordan and Israel/Palestine. Bin Laden often referred to the events following World War I that resulted in the dismemberment of Turkey's empire and the end of both Islamic rule of

Muslims and the demise of the Caliphate. His famous statement on 7 October 2001 in response to the commencement of US military operations to liberate Afghanistan referred specifically to the 1920 Treaty of Sèvres, which detached these Arab provinces from the Muslim rule.[60] And, in one of Al-Qaeda's major addresses before the 2003 American-led invasion of Iraq, he cited the 1916 Sykes-Picot Agreement—the secret understanding reached between France and Britain that divided the Levant and surrounding countries into French and British spheres of influence. Under this arrangement, France received Syria and Lebanon, while Britain got Palestine and Jordan, as well as Iraq.[61]

Syria has thus long been an Al-Qaeda *idée fixe*. According to Husain, that country has even more of the characteristics of the same type of perfect jihadi storm that Afghanistan possessed three decades ago: widespread support among the Arab world, the provision of financial assistance from wealthy Gulf supporters, a popular cause that readily attracts foreign volunteers, and a contiguous border facilitating the movements of these fighters into and out of the declared battle space. Syria, though, has several additionally compelling factors that have figured prominently in the attention Core Al-Qaeda has focused on it:

- First, it is sacred land referred to in early Muslim scripture and history, complete with enormously evocative "end times," prophetic overtones.

- Second, in the geographical scheme of traditional Ottoman rule, it contains the al-Haram al-Sharif—the "Holy Precinct" of Jerusalem, where the Dome of the Rock (from which the Prophet is reputed to have ascended to Heaven) and the al-Aqsa Mosque, Islam's third holiest shrine, are located.

- Third, the enemy—as the above-quoted al-Fida' message states—are the Nusayri: the hated Shi'a apostate Alawite minority sect whom the revered 13th - century Islamic theologian Ibn Taymiyah (author of the key jihadi text, *The Religious and Moral Doctrine of Jihad*)[62] called upon Sunnis to do battle with. "For Sunni jihadist fighters," Husain explains, "the conflict in Syria is religiously underwritten by their most important teacher."

- Fourth, unlike Afghanistan, which was part of the *ummah* but distant from Arab lands, Syria offers Al-Qaeda a base in the Arab

heartland. As Husain notes, "This makes them relevant again to daily politics of the Middle East."[63]

Indeed, Core Al-Qaeda's attraction to Syria is nothing less than irresistible. After Al-Qaeda missed the opportunities to intervene or assert itself in the seismic events that initiated the Arab Spring in Tunisia and Egypt in early 2011 and saw itself relegated to only a supporting role in Libya, al-Zawahiri doubtless regards the Syrian civil war as a key opportunity with which to burnish Al-Qaeda's credentials and demonstrate its relevance. Even more so, Syria's geographic proximity to both neighboring Jordan and Israel realizes a Core Al-Qaeda dream: bringing it to the borders of precisely the pro-Western, insufficiently Islamic Arab monarchy that the organisation has long despised in Jordan and to the very gates of its most detested foe, Israel.[64]

Syria is also a particularly agreeable environment for Al-Qaeda. During the 2003–2009 Sunni insurgency in Iraq, it was a key base for training foreign fighters and supporting them logistically. It was also the main conduit for these fighters entering and exiting Iraq—many of whom were Syrian jihadis themselves. Shortly after the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, the late Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, founder and leader of the Ja'mat Tawdid wu Jihad ("Monotheism and Holy War Group"), which later formally allied itself with Al-Qaeda and adopted the Al-Qaeda appellation, established operations in Syria that contributed enormously thereafter to the escalation of violence in Iraq.[65]

The jihadi foreign fighter contingent currently in Syria is believed to be small, amounting only to an estimated 1,200–1,500 combatants, and thus constituting only a small portion of the forces arrayed against the Assad regime.[66] Nonetheless, its influence is palpable through Syrian rebel organisations such as the Jabhat al-Nusra li-Ahli al-Shaam (Front for the Victory of the Levantine People, also referred to as the Jabhat al-Nusra, al-Nusra Front to Protect the Levant or simply as al-Nusra).[67] According to the Quilliam Foundation's Noman Bentoman, a former jihadi himself who was a founding member of the Libyan Islamic Fighting Front (LIFG), an Al-Qaeda affiliate, al-Nusra "is largely influenced by Al-Qaeda's rigid jihadi ideology" and, while its main enemy is the Syrian government and armed forces, it has been rhetorically hostile to the US, in addition to promulgating harshly sectarian views that are focused mostly on Syria's ruling Alawite minority.[68] Al-Nusra's emerging role as the spearhead of the most bloody and spectacular opposition attacks is demonstrated by the nearly tenfold escalation of its operations between March and June 2012.[69]

It is in Syria, accordingly, that Core Al-Qaeda's future—its relevance and perhaps even its longevity—turns. In this respect, its spear carrier there has been Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI).[70] The movement's Iraqi branch arguably demonstrates the limitations of decapitation as a counterterrorism strategy, given that its first three commanders—al-Zarqawi, Abu Ayyub al-Masri, and Abu Abdullah al-Rashid al-Bagdadi—have all been killed (Zarqawi in 2006 and his two successors both in 2010). Yet, the group is perhaps more threatening and consequential today than at any time since the height of the insurgency in that country between 2003 and 2008.

The December 2011 withdrawal of US and coalition forces from Iraq breathed new life into AQI.[71] Although violence overall had declined in Iraq that year, the group was nonetheless responsible for some of the bloodiest and most spectacular attacks against Shi'a pilgrims and neighborhoods, as well as against a variety of government targets—ranging from police recruits to senior officials. Fourteen AQI attacks alone claimed the lives of nearly 600 people and caused injuries to some 1,500 others.[72] This pattern continued during 2012[73]: typical of these activities were the coordinated attacks on Shi'a in the midst of a religious holiday in June that killed at least 66 people;[74] the coordinated car bombs, checkpoint ambushes, shootings of policemen in their homes and assaults on military bases that convulsed the country on a single day in July and left 100 people dead;[75] and the twin car bombings in Baghdad at the end of the month that killed 19 people.[76]

At the start of the Ramadan holiday in July 2012, AQI's leader, Abu Bakir al-Baghdadi, drew deliberate parallels between the group's war on Iraq's Shi'a majority-led government and the Sunni uprising against the Assad regime in neighboring Syria. Praising the Syrian jihadis, he declared:

> You have taught the world lessons in courage, jihad, and patience, and you have taught the *ummah* and proven to it with absolute proof and argument that injustice is only lifted with power and strength, and that weakness is only erased by giving souls and bloodshed, and spreading body parts and skulls of the martyrs and those wounded on the path.[77]

Indeed, fomenting sectarian divisions and enmity has been a mainstay of both the AQI organisation in Iraq and its counterparts in Syria.[78] In Iraq, for instance, attacks on Shi'a account for 86% of all major AQI attacks, according to research

conducted by the Henry Jackson Society's Robin Simcox.[79] It is a trend that is also reflected in Al-Qaeda messaging and outreach. Al-Zawahiri's address to the "Lions of the Levant" in February 2012, for instance, deliberately incited sectarian tensions in Syria, striking clear anti-Alawite, anti-Hezbollah and anti-Iranian themes.[80] And, AQI propaganda has long prominently propagated anti-Shi'a sentiments, setting the violence it has inflicted on that community and the Iraqi government within the context of the eternal holy struggle against Shi'a and Iranian domination of Sunnis. As one analysis of the growing incidence of Al-Qaeda sectarian messaging concluded that:

> Al-Qaeda has a clear motive to use sectarianism to amplify its influence and that the information environment since the Arab Spring provides a vastly increased number of opportunities to do so. The roiling political changes in the region seem to have put sectarianism near the center of public discourse, perhaps because the sense of instability or threat moves people to reaffirm their closest identities to regain balance. Alternately, people may feel freer to express longstanding grievances in the absence of a controlling regime. In any case, Al-Qaeda is facing an atmosphere permeated by sectarian issues, and only has to decide where and how to exploit them.[81]

AL-QAEDA CORE AND AL-QAEDA IN IRAQ IN 2018

The challenge of looking five years into Al-Qaeda's future is evidenced simply by looking to the situation a little over five years ago. In 2007, despite the death of al-Zarqawi, Iraq was still enmeshed in the violent throes of an insurgency that had yet to be brought to heel by the "surge" of American combat forces and adoption of the new counterinsurgency strategy directed by General David Petraeus. In South Asia, US relations with Pakistan were certainly far more positive than they are today, and Afghanistan was not beset to the same extent it is today by the insurgent violence that now potentially threatens to re-submerge the country once the US and ISAF draw-down is completed in 2014. The conventional wisdom was that Core Al-Qaeda had already ceased to exist as an operational entity and that the main threat came not from established terrorist organisations with an identifiable leadership and chain of command, but mainly from "lone wolves" and unaffiliated, untrained "bunches of guys."

Despite the difficulty of predicting where Al-Qaeda and AQI will be next year, much less in 2018, given the changes of the past 12 months alone, several conclusions based on the preceding discussion may be posited that will likely affect Core Al-Qaeda's longevity and relevance:

- First, Al-Qaeda is still strongest at the geographical periphery of the dramatic events of the past 18 months. Pakistan, Somalia and Yemen, as noted above, still remain key Al-Qaeda operational environments and sanctuaries and, in Yemen's case, rather than depriving Al-Qaeda of political space, the Arab Spring has created new opportunities in that country both for AQAP's expansion and consolidation of its recent gains. Core Al-Qaeda demonstrably benefits from, and feeds off, these developments—thus ensuring its longevity, at least for the foreseeable future.

- Second, the conflict in Syria—and the attendant opportunities it presents to Al-Qaeda at a critical time in its history—has potentially breathed new life into the Al-Qaeda brand, exactly as Iraq did in 2003 and, by extension, the core organisation, with new relevance and status that, depending on the future course of events in both that country and the surrounding region, could potentially resuscitate Core Al-Qaeda's waning fortunes, much as occurred nine years ago.

- Third, Al-Qaeda's core demographic has always been disenfranchised, disillusioned and marginalized youth. There is no evidence that the potential pool of young "hot heads" to which the core's message has always been directed will necessary dissipate or constrict in light of the Arab Spring. Moreover, it may likely grow in the future as impatience over the slow pace of democratisation and economic reform takes hold and many who took to the streets find themselves excluded from or deprived of the political and economic benefits that the upheavals in their countries promised. The losers and disenchanted of the Arab Spring may thus provide a new reservoir of recruits for Al-Qaeda in the near future—especially in those countries across North Africa and the Middle East with proportionally high populations below the age of 20.

- Fourth, Core Al-Qaeda's embrace of a patently sectarian strategy may perhaps backfire in the long term, but for the moment has proven effective in rallying fighters and support (financial and

otherwise) both to Syria and Iraq. Its extension to Lebanon and elsewhere with similar minority populations is not improbable given the recent upsurge in jihadi messaging and propaganda deliberately inciting violence and manipulating the sectarian issue to Core Al-Qaeda's advantage.

- Fifth, the instability and disorders generated by the upheaval caused by the Arab Spring may also affect the intelligence and security services of those countries most caught up in these developments. They will likely remain less focused on Al-Qaeda and other transnational threats and more concerned with internal problems. Indeed, in those countries with active Islamist political parties, there may be a reluctance to engage the more extreme and violent, though ideologically like-minded, elements at the fringe of these movements.

- Sixth, the continued fragmentation of the jihadi movement as a result of bin Laden's killing and Core Al-Qaeda's weakening may paradoxically present new and daunting challenges to both regional and Western intelligence and security services. The continual emergence of new, smaller, more dispersed terrorist entities with a more fluid membership that easily gravitates between and among groups that have little or no established *modus operandi* will raise difficulties in terms of identifying, tracking, anticipating and predicting threats. The authorities in Northern Ireland, for instance, encountered precisely this problem in the aftermath of the 1998 "Good Friday" accords, when the threat from a single, monolithic entity, the Provisional Irish Republican Army (PIRA), devolved into the atomized threats presented by the smaller, less structured, more amorphous dissident Republican groups.[82]

- Seventh, the progeny of seminal jihadi leaders either killed or imprisoned over the past decade as a result of the war on terrorism may emerge as heirs to the movement bequeathed to them by their elders. For instance, until his death in 2009, Saad bin Laden, Osama's eldest son, was being groomed to succeed his father.[83] The prospect of additional sons, nephews, cousins and more distant relations forming a new generation of fighters and filling leadership roles in Core Al-Qaeda is unnerving: not least because successive

generations of the same terrorist organisations have shown themselves to be more lethally violent than their predecessors.

- Eighth, there is the problem of the "old made new": former leaders or senior level fighters who emerge from prison or exile to assume key positions of command of new or existing terrorist organisations, including Core Al-Qaeda, and thus revitalize and reinvigorate flagging or dormant terrorist groups. This same development of course led to the formation of the AQAP in early 2009. Egyptian President Morsi's pardon of 16 leading jihadi prisoners from the al-Gama'a Islamiyya and al-Jihad's groups[84] and the amnesties granted to hundreds of others have the potential to infuse existing organisations with greater militancy and violence. In addition, at least a dozen or more key Core Al-Qaeda personnel are still being sheltered in Iran, including Saif al-Adl. If allowed their freedom, they could easily strengthen the existing central leadership.

- Finally, the continued absence of a successful, major terrorist attack in North America since 2001 may induce a period of quiet and calm that lulls us into a state of false complacency, lowering our guard and, in turn, provoking Core Al-Qaeda or one of its allies to chance a dramatically spectacular attack.

None of the above is pre-ordained, much less certain. It is equally likely that Core Al-Qaeda will continue to degenerate and eventually devolve into nothing more than a post-modern movement, with a set of loose ideas and ideologies. It would continue to pose a terrorist threat, but a far weaker, more sporadic and perhaps less consequential one. The future of the Al-Qaeda Core depends not only on whether they can find a new cause—such as Syria, today like Iraq in 2003—but also, fundamentally, whether they can learn from past experiences and avoid the mistakes that previously undermined their struggle through self-inflicted wounds.

AL-QAEDA IN THE ISLAMIC MAGHREB IN 2018

One of the key difficulties of an evaluation of the future of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) stems from the numerous uncertainties and upheavals that have been sparked by the current situation in Mali. This acceleration of local history forces us to consider with humility, even scepticism, a greater number of changes and developments, insofar as the control of northern Mali, even in the short term, changes a lot of things for AQIM and is such as to redefine (for better or worse) some of its operational objectives and practices. In light of France's military intervention in the region in early 2013, it will be important in the short term to assess its resilience and its operational and heavy weapons capabilities in Mali, and now also in neighbouring countries, especially Libya.

COMPLEXITY AND DESCRIPTION

In the face of such a fluid, complex and evolving subject as international terrorism, there is not a single way of describing things. Thus, the idea of envisaging AQIM as a branch or subsidiary of a more global structure which we can simply describe as "Al-Qaeda Core" warrants further discussion, even though it seems to have been adopted by most analysts, particularly those in North America.

Such a way of describing the complexity can no doubt be explained by the importance of September 11, and understandably the tendency of the security apparatus of several states to describe the jihadist networks and structures throughout the world based on a main centre of responsibility. This approach has some advantages. However, it underestimates local factors and the "long memory" (irredentism, history and local sociology and anthropology). Nevertheless, with time, undoubtedly due to the influence of military realities in the field in Afghanistan and Iraq, and counter-terrorist successes in Afghanistan and Pakistan, this description has changed; it has been broken up and has been further downgraded to a local movement.

The zone in which the AQIM operates is not necessarily a set of ungoverned territories. While the states have difficulty controlling this space—a true maze

of tensions and problems including territorial conflicts, juxtaposing trafficking networks and migrations—this so-called "grey zone" is in reality controlled by local populations, who understand it and have resided there since time immemorial. The Sahara, the desert space, is inhabited by an ancestral social substratum. The routes across the desert have changed little since the Middle Ages and, some routes have changed little since before this period. Also, their control, today like yesterday, is a necessity. These routes are still used by nomadic populations, even though these populations are today increasingly urbanised, making these populations a mixture of the old and modern, a mixture of sedentary and nomadic populations all at the same time. Traffickers and the AQIM exist, act, and operate in this complex space, in this specific social geography, where they have become full partners, using the local ancestral practices (burying of water stocks, of petrol and of food, construction of temporary settlements or camps using the materials at hand which are provided by the land). This land has indeed existed since time immemorial and will be the same in five years.

AQIM was formed in southern Algeria (outside of the diasporas in Europe and North America) in a traditional area in the late 1980s, in large part because of its failure in the north, but also out of necessity because the most radical Algerian Islamists needed a refuge outside of Algeria's main centres. These militants established ties with the Arab trading tribes and the traffickers. These ties were solidified through marriages and a quasi-social and client-based redistribution of the money from trafficking (and ransoms), in particular in the Adrar des Ifoghas where the borders of Algeria and Mali come together.

DEFINITION OF AQIM

AQIM is considered a distinct organisation, which is very much a part of the local, even ancestral, realities, but it is influenced in certain aspects by the transnational jihadist networks (Al-Qaeda Core). Thus, it is essentially considered a "glocal" organisation, thus both local and global. This perspective allows us to describe more fluid, imprecise or even anthropological and historical realities. Jihadism existed in the Maghreb and in the Sahel before Al-Qaeda Core. We can assume that it will exist thereafter, whether or not it is called AQIM, and whatever its level of activity or dangerousness.

INFLUENCE OF TRANSNATIONAL NETWORKS ON AQIM

The porousness of these local and global organisations is ancient, as we were able to observe through the role played by Algerian mujahidin in the Afghan war against the Soviet army. Certain sub-Saharan militants became moreover distinguished members of the global movement. More locally, the current spread of jihadism to Mauritania, Niger and Mali occurred, as it did elsewhere, due to Wahhabist proselytism (and the sporadic deployment of jihadist emissaries, in particular when jihadism was introduced to Sudan), as well as to local, socio-economic and political reasons, including the use of political Islamism by the opposition and by the states, as occurred in Mauritania.

Although some believe that, unlike other organisations, AQIM did not officially swear an oath (*al-Bayat*) to Al-Qaeda Core, which puts these links into perspective, the level of contact and of communication between Algerian jihadists and international networks during, for example, the jihad in Iraq, seems critical to understanding the importance of its links of solidarity and of exchanges.

The most obvious example seems to be the importation into Algeria (more so in the south) of the practice of suicide attacks, even though Islam in the Maghreb (malekism) is more resistant to this type of fatal act. However, suicide attacks do not seem to have resulted in substantial political gains for AQIM. It is even possible that it is now suffering from a lack of volunteers in Algeria. The large-scale hosting-taking operation in In Amenas should not be seen as a suicide attack, but rather as inspired from global jihadist practises (eg. Moscow, Beslan and Mumbai).

AQIM has also imported from the global movement certain modern operational practices such as the use of satellite imaging which is freely available to prepare for an attack (precedent: attack of Bouchaoui?[85]) and the adoption of modern production and communication methods (video, Al-Andalus, the audiovisual production branch, as well as a number of successive or alternative Internet sites etc.). The exchange or recruitment of militants, which is in keeping with the international dimension of the AQIM, is also a developing trend, although AQIM's attempt to unite the jihadists of the Maghreb has so far yielded very mixed results.

The quality and intensity of contacts between AQIM and Al-Qaeda Core, today like tomorrow, depends on many factors, but in particular the level of activity, and thus on the symbolic and political weight of Al-Qaeda Core. Undoubtedly we can say that the more this organisation downsizes, the more the jihadist networks will strengthen their regional and local ties and will naturally seek to establish links with organisations which have some kind of geographical and cultural connection with it and/or which are concretely more accessible. It is easier for AQIM, which is expanding north-south, to establish links with Boko Haram than with Indonesia, or even Yemen. Al-Qaeda Core now seems for AQIM to be only a symbolic doctrinal point of reference with which various ties forged in the past in several jihad zones still exist. There is an international solidarity based principle, which is also used as a pretext to externalise internal disagreements or problems, as in the case of the fate of hostages.

For the rest, it appears that the local movement has been quite self-sufficient, which may distinguish it from other jihad zones, where the affiliation with Al-Qaeda Core may be more pronounced.

CURRENT POLARISATION AND CHALLENGES: *AQIMLAND* OR NOT?

The current situation in Mali is unstable and it appears to lead increasingly to the fragmentation of AQIM. It may evolve in various ways which will have very uncertain consequences in terms of the future of AQIM. Certain possible scenarios may complement each other:

- A political solution which would involve more or less the Tuareg populations and southern Mali in a new power sharing and an institutional and political reorganisation of the country (eg. federation or confederation). It would also include groups considered today "Tuareg jihadists". This scenario would mean that AQIM would again become a clandestine organisation operating in rural areas, further diminishing its already weakened capabilities, depending on the circumstances.

- Reinforcement of the Malian army (air support, logistics, intelligence and a few African battalions), along with in the background a more or less coercive Western support to retake northern Mali, as well as to

detect and pursue militants in desert zones. Its purpose would be to retake northern Mali, as well as to detect and pursue militants in desert zones.

- The use of armed drones to strike AQIM targets (itinerant camps, convoys, leaders located in their geographical areas, etc.) could receive serious consideration. It would have numerous advantages, given situations that exist in other zones where they are used with little negative, and in particular political, consequences (no development of a new jihad zone as "Crusader" troops are not visible on the ground). This is a particularly sensitive issue given that parts of AQIM are now outside of Mali, for example in the south-west of Libya.

Depending on whether the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and/or the Malian army acquire more influence or power, the near future will become a moment of truth for AQIM.

Before the French military intervention of early 2013, AQIM's significant presence in the Timbuktu region had given it access to all the logistics and resources of this city, enabling it to have greater territorial and political control over a sedentary population. Some had described this situation as the establishment of "Aqimland", which, if the situation worsens after a French withdrawal, could give the movement access to the following:

- Malian military equipment (formerly Libyan military equipment);
- Banking and business structures (seizures, money laundering, and terrorist financing);
- Medical structures and medications;
- Communication, encryption or other means;
- Logistical and transportation capabilities; and
- Propaganda and proselytism (introduction of *in situ* recruitment).

This could have led to the development, albeit rudimentary, of an integrated command, control, communication and intelligence capability, otherwise known by the acronym C_3I. This is why the *status quo*, which greatly benefited AQIM, previously made it difficult to eradicate terrorism. If such a situation existed in five years, we would be closer to a situation similar to that of Afghanistan under the Taliban with the same opportunities, training and political and religious standards. It is however unlikely that northern Mali, or more broadly the Sahel, will become in that period a kind of Afghanistan or Iraq in terms of the level of the violence or of the various terrorist capabilities. Aside from the socio-economic development challenges, the reasons are as follows:

- AQIM has not had on site—far from it—the capabilities and skills to become a beacon of ideology. Its theological productions were never very sophisticated or many in number. Unlike Baghdad and Pakistan, Algeria has no prestigious Islamic site. Sub-Saharan Islam, which had its moment of glory several centuries ago, is a mixture of animism, Sufism (key elements against any jihadist zeal), and a cult of saints[86], which is bad for a hard-core salafist;
- The comparison with Somalia, albeit appealing, does not seem very logical either because of the presence of raw materials (petroleum and uranium) and because of many expatriates from the former colonial powers, for whom the security of their citizens is critical;
- Also, the local demographics, now or in five years, and the infrastructure used to access the zone are not comparable to other jihad zones, including perhaps Afghanistan;
- For all that, the presence of militants from Europe (France and Germany) and elsewhere, which had been documented over several months before the French intervention, is not alarming in itself, but is worrisome, particularly should these militants return to their country of origin. Like in Iraq in 2003-2005, the same causes produce the same effects.

AQIM STRUCTURES AND AN EVALUATION OF THEIR DEVELOPMENT

The idea of belonging to a secret organisation like AQIM is always more complex and ambiguous than it seems. Is an occasional informant or lookout person who has close ties to an AQIM militant himself a member of AQIM?

Such an organisation has traditionally been shaped by its culture, security demands, the demography of its supporters and militants, and even the climate (season for mobilisation). AQIM has Islamic structures that are characteristic of jihadism. In fact, both the scope of its activity and security demands mean that members of its cells are sometimes few in number or inactive. It should thus be recalled that the role of the "emir-general" is at the very least very minor and even symbolic, given the fact that he must isolate himself to survive.

The AQIM organisation can be represented empirically[87]. It includes a "national emir", Abelmalek Droukdal, appointed in September 2004, who is assisted by several committees. The most important of these committees are as follows:

- **Military committee**, responsible for preparing missions and training;
- **Political and international relations committee**, responsible for relations with similar organisations abroad;
- **Legal committee**, responsible for ensuring respect of Islamic law and for deciding on the legitimacy and legality of certain actions; and
- **Media committee**, which disseminates official communiqués.

In late 2010 and early 2011, AQIM had about 600 to 800 fighters, spread out in four regions. Each region had significant decision-making power, particularly in the terms of actions, so that they could adapt to the characteristics of their respective terrain, but also, because of the need to survive and the communications problems. Back then, these regions were as follows:

- **Centre**, the most active and most important. It is headed by Rachid Abdelmoumen, alias Younès Hoddeifa;

- **East**, which is active on an ongoing basis and is led by Mohamed Larbi Aissi, alias Mohamed Lemrigla, alias Mohamed Abou Salah al Blidi;

- **West**, the least active and led by Brahim H'Bel, alias Abdelhafid;

- **South**, led by Yahia Djouadi, alias Abou Ammar. This region is the largest and includes resistance fighters from the northeast of Algeria and the katibates[88] of the Sahel in northern Mali. These katibates have a few hundred fighters (more than 200 in late 2010) and consist of four principal groups:

    - katiba El Moulathamine ("those who wear the veil"), headed by Mokhtar Belmokhtar, born on 1 June 1972 in Ghardaia. He is semi-autonomous and controls numerous trafficking routes (perhaps 80 to 100 men);

    - katiba Tariq Ibn Zyad (from the name of the conqueror of Andalusia), headed by Abid Hamadou, alias Abou Zeid, born on 12 December 1965 in Zaouia El-Abidia and killed in February 2013 in the Ifoghas region (perhaps more than 100 fighters);

    - saryat Al Forqane ("judgment"), whose leader is Yahia Abou el Hammam, alias Djamel Akacha. It had about 70 men in late 2010; and

    - saryat Al Ansar (the "supporters"), led by Abdelkrim El Tergui, a Malian and a Tuareg of the Azawad tribe. It had 40 men in 2010. He has known, long-standing and numerous contacts with the emir of Ansar Eddine, which have resulted in certain current situations.

The military operations against AQIM have considerably weakened its structure and strength, although it remains impossible to know its exact posture today based on open sources.

AQIM AND ITS PROSPECTS FOR REGIONAL AND INTER-REGIONAL COOPERATION

Faced with an existential threat, AQIM is also confronted with many practical challenges. Certain difficulties with recruiting operational militants in some areas, such as in Algerian cities, and the sometimes local origins of radicalisation or jihadisation limit its potential development south of the Maghreb. This challenge therefore makes it useful for AQIM to pursue closer ties with compatible organisations such as Boko Haram, an organisation which is itself deeply rooted in its ancestral local situation that explains its own jihad. Existing or emerging areas of cooperation could include the following:

- Exchanging or sending fighters in solidarity, even for symbolic purposes, given certain limits in terms of "transferable" members;
- Integrating propaganda;
- Exchanging operational best practices;
- Providing logistics, accommodation and rear base support;
- Possibly sharing international supply, mobility and funding networks;
- Supporting the management of certain hostages ("subcontracting"); and
- In the diasporas, potentially taking into account "sister organisations" in funding the cause; since the linguistic communities are different (Anglophone and Francophone), the diasporas do not fully overlap, except perhaps in Canada.

Any cooperation with the jihadist organisations in East Africa (or Yemen) is less known and observable[89]. The geopolitical continuity of these regions seems less obvious than the continuity between the Maghreb and the Sahel, even though some Algerian fighters were active in Darfur in the recent past. However, some of the above areas of cooperation seem within the realm of the probable from now on.

However, even in terms of five or six years, a partial or total merger, or a strengthened integration process seems highly unrealistic. These organisations have political objectives, and even underlying local socio-ethnic elements, despite the fact that they have a more internationalist frame of reference. Otherwise, such a merger would involve competition for leadership positions, which would raise many difficulties. Imagining cooperation on a total and merger-like basis is therefore hazardous, except perhaps if one of the two organisations were in decay at the time and the remaining militants were to take refuge in the remaining organisation.

AQIM's ties with Al-Qaeda Core may in future depend on the fate of the latter organisation. As an organisation in decline, AQ Core no longer seems to have the abilities to attract, mobilise and train that it did at its peak in 2000-2001. This state seems unlikely to change in the foreseeable future. These ties could even be altered again, for example, in the event of a change in leadership and/or the rise in power of one katiba over another, resulting in AQIM having a more regional than global focus.

Finally, AQIM frequently tries to recruit militants or sympathisers from amongst the diasporas of Europe and, secondarily, North America (and Canada in particular). The potentially large breeding ground of extremism is known: various generational strata of Algerian jihadist salafism (*Groupe islamique armé* / Armed Islamic Group, then GSPC, then AQIM), socially isolated individuals, etc. This trend is likely to remain unchanged, especially since all AQIM needs in order to claim a victory is for an undetected individual to succeed in carrying out an attack. The prevailing situation in Mali could potentially influence certain members of the Malian diaspora. In effect, any crisis more or less reaches the communities dispersed throughout the world.

TOWARDS "SUB-JIHADISATION"?

In addition to France's military intervention, one of the limits to AQIM's growth could be the religious and ethnic particularities of the area, since the whole zone from Mauritania to Sudan is divided by Arab and Tuareg populations on the one hand, and black African populations on the other. Remember, many conflicts are currently active in this huge zone, with its often fragmented road networks and in which populations traditionally fight for

control of pastures and water. And the entire situation is taking place within colonial borders that sometimes split up cultural spaces that used to be homogenous (such as that of the Tuareg).

Furthermore, the temptation to engage in jihad is not new, but ancestral, and was particularly prominent in the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries with the empire of Al-Hadj Omar in the western Sahel, the empire of Shekku Ahmadu in the central Niger River valley, and the Hausa-Fulani empire of Sokoto in the area in which Boko Haram is currently active. Certain practices even find a favourable local justification. The practice of taking hostages for ransom was very widespread in the Sahara and Sahel regions (western and central *Bilad al-Sudan*), and many local legal scholars of the Quran debated this subject in the medieval period, such as Muhammad al-Maghili in the 15th century and Ahmed Baba at-Timbukti in the 16th century. The ransom itself was often considered the ultimate life insurance for local Muslim, or even Christian, hostages.

Therefore, diverse organisations, groups and cells have recently appeared and may appear again, creating "proximity jihads" for which AQIM would be a doctrinal or operational frame of reference, a source of inspiration or support, or "AQIM core." In fact, nothing prevents the appearance of other groups and networks, in particular in the areas where jihadism can develop: shanty towns or informal urban spaces, such as the Arafat neighbourhood in Nouakchott, or Casablanca, and in which radical Islamist activism may be expressed in the form of salafist jihadist cells. The following are examples of this phenomenon:

- Salafism amongst certain Senegalese students; and
- The Tuareg of Niger (spread from Azawad).

An important precursor example seems to be the cell *Ansarouh allah Chinguetti*, which was dismantled in Nouakchott after it killed French tourists and which is typically "glocal." To this movement, AQIM is a source of operational inspiration and propaganda, even though the recruiting and symbolism remain local, as the city of Chinguetti embodies a sort of golden age of local Muslim theology.

Connected to a multitude of local relationships, the organisations currently acting in northern Mali seem to have uncertain and even opportunistic jihadist theological underpinnings, especially Ansar Eddine, which is made up primarily

of Ifoghas, Idnanes and Chamanamasses, who are often former militants in the secularist *Mouvement national de libération de l'Azawad* / National Movement for the Liberation of the Azawad (MNLA) lured away by family or tribal solidarity. Ansar Eddine took the name of an Islamist organisation that was known in Mali, and the recent wish of its leadership to have a specific emblem, separate from the colours of AQIM, is a symbolic element that highlights its very local nature and possibly its desire to distinguish itself from AQIM.M.

The *Mouvement pour l'unicité et le djihad en Afrique de l'Ouest (MUJAO)* / Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJWA), despite an internationalist component that includes part of its leadership, seems to be characterised by an overrepresentation of members from Gao (of all ethnicities), who are now trying to develop local solidarity ties through marriage to reinforce their settlement in the area and bolster their current influence.

The future of what remains of AQIM remains uncertain. It appears impossible for it to create a safe haven for itself due to a lack of militants to hold territory and as a result of the armed intervention by France, Mali and Chad in the Ifoghas region—especially in the Ametetai Valley. However, one can already see militants redeploying towards further areas and others blending into Mali's urban fabric. From that point of view, and especially in light of the In Amenas incident, the Libyan desert is becoming ever more appealing and therefore warrants attention. Another question that remains open is the degree to which AQIM was able to protect the heavy weapons it had in northern Mali and which it might still have in its possession.

Finally, there is a high likelihood that jihadist activity will move elsewhere in Sub-Saharan Africa:

- In the *short term*, retaliatory acts against French interests, out of precaution, cannot be dismissed, particularly because of the great number of French nationals in West Africa (eg. Senegal and Tunisia);

- In the *medium term*, a relative vacuum created by a significantly weakened AQIM could provide space for another local jihad organisation to gain momentum.

DEFEAT, DISPERSAL AND DECLINE: BLEAK PROSPECTS FOR AL-QAEDA IN EAST AFRICA IN 2018

Al-Qaeda in East Africa and the Horn (AQEA) is in steady decline. For more than a decade, since the group's signature bombings of the American embassies in Kenya and Tanzania, its operations have become less frequent, its strategic value questionable and its impact less dramatic. Two generations of AQEA leadership have been all but eliminated and a third is currently embattled. With Al-Qaeda's core leadership in Afghanistan and Pakistan also increasingly on the defensive and unable to offer meaningful direction or support, AQEA's prospects over the near term look bleak.

Al-Qaeda has been more successful as an ideology and an inspiration in East Africa than as an organisation: despite having failed, with the brief exception of Somalia, to raise the black flag of Salafi jihadism anywhere on East African soil, it has etched its banner in the imaginations of thousands of youths, successfully conflating local grievances and aspirations with its own grand design of establishing a puritanical "Islamic Caliphate". And as the economically powerful Salafi school of Islam continues to gain ground across the region, so does the pool of potential recruits to the extremist fringe continue to grow as well.

AQEA, the organisation, may not survive long enough to enjoy the fruits of its labour: though not yet defunct, it is increasingly a thing of the past. Al-Qaeda, the idea, however, is likely to continue to inspire future generations of militants with diverse aims, objectives and membership that can continue to present a serious threat. However, Al-Qaeda will likely offer little to unite them beyond a common strand of ideological DNA. The identity of AQEA is thus not only interlinked with, but also likely to be subsumed by, an increasingly diffuse constellation of local and essentially parochial extremist groups.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF AQEA

Al-Qaeda has evolved through several generations since its arrival in East Africa in the early 1990s. Each successive cohort of AQEA leaders has experienced progressively attenuated relations with Al-Qaeda Core (AQC), a trend that seems likely to continue in the foreseeable future.

The First Generation: 1991 -1996

The first generation of AQEA was essentially synonymous with AQC: in 1991, Osama bin Laden established himself in the Sudanese capital, Khartoum, which served as the organisation's base of operations for five years. In December the following year, the organisation conducted its first terrorist attacks, bombing two hotels in Aden, Yemen, where US troops en route to Somalia were believed to be staying. Al-Qaeda also provided support to various Somali groups opposed to the US-led intervention in Somalia between 1992 and 1994, and in 1995 was linked to an assassination attempt against Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak in the Ethiopian capital, Addis Ababa.

During this period, Al-Qaeda's operations in East Africa were directly supervised by the organisation's core leadership: Abu Ubaidah Al-Banshiri, a founding member of the organisation, headed its African operations from Nairobi, Kenya until his death in a ferry accident on Lake Tanganyika in May 1996; both Mohamed Atef, a senior AQ military commander, and senior trainer Ali Muhammed travelled to Somalia to oversee support for Somali fighters opposed to the US-led military intervention in that country, and Osama bin Laden himself subsequently claimed partial credit for the October 1993 Mogadishu street battles that prompted the withdrawal of US troops in 1994.

In May 1996, under pressure from the US and Saudi governments, bin Laden and his associates left Sudan for Afghanistan, making way for more junior figures to assume the leadership of AQEA.

The Second Generation: 1996 - 2002

The second generation of AQEA was a largely Kenya-based network of operatives who oversaw what was arguably the apogee of Al-Qaeda's influence in East Africa and the Horn. AQEA's principal achievements during this period—the 1998 US embassy bombings in Kenya and Tanzania, the 2002 suicide bombing of the Paradise Hotel in Kikambala (Kenya) and the simultaneous, but unsuccessful, attempt to shoot down an Israeli charter aircraft departing Mombasa airport—were the product of a largely autonomous network, guided and supported by AQC, but with a much greater local flavour.

The new leadership of AQEA consisted mainly of junior figures with operational experience in the region and local ties. Several members, including the network's presumed leader, a Lebanese-American named Wadih el-Hage, and Mohammed Sadiq Odeh, a Saudi-born Palestinian, had travelled in and out of Somalia for Al-Qaeda, before settling in Kenya. El-Hage moved to Kenya in 1994, where he established a local non-governmental organisation, Help Africa People.

Unlike el-Hage and Odeh, other AQEA members were citizens of the region: Abu Talha Al-Sudani, a key leader and financier, was Sudanese; Fazul Abdullah Mohamed was originally from the Comoros Islands; Khalfan Khamis Mohamed, Suleiman Abdallah and Ahmed Khlafan Ghailani were Tanzanians; Fahid Ally Msalam, Ahmed Salim Swedhan and Issa Osman Issa were Kenyan nationals. AQEA was beginning to acquire its own regional character, distinct from Al-Qaeda Core in Afghanistan.

Following the August 1998 US embassy bombings in Nairobi and Dar-es-Salaam, most of this second-generation AQEA leadership fled abroad (where many of them were apprehended), further diluting the organisation's international profile while reinforcing its regional character. AQEA's next major operation in the region was planned, directed and carried out almost entirely by East Africans, exercising growing autonomy from AQC leadership.

The Third Generation: 2002 to present

On 28 November 2002, AQEA staged two nearly simultaneous attacks near Mombasa, Kenya. Suicide bombers drove an explosives-laden vehicle into the courtyard of the Paradise Hotel near Kikambala, just as a large group of Israeli tourists arrived. The bombing left thirteen dead and dozens injured; at the same time, an Israeli passenger aircraft departing Moi International Airport came under fire from two SA-7 surface-to-air missiles, both of which failed to reach their target. Less than a week later, Al-Qaeda claimed responsibility for the attacks.[90]

The Mombasa operation signalled the next major evolution of AQEA. Immediately after the attacks, the leaders of the cell responsible—notably Fazul Abdallah Mohamed and Saleh Ali Salah Nabhan—relocated to Somalia, which remained their base for the better part of the next decade. From that point onward, AQEA acquired an increasingly multi-polar identity: a loosely

coordinated association of autonomous national networks, linked by a common strand of ideological DNA, but shaped and motivated by local dynamics. The increasingly diffuse nature of AQEA since 2002 was also propelled by the degradation of its leadership cadre by anti-terrorism operations. In March 2003, less than four months after the Mombasa attacks, Suleiman Abdallah (a.k.a. Issa Tanzania), was seized in Mogadishu by a militia and rendered into custody abroad. According to a confession recorded by Kenyan suspect Omar Said Omar, Abdallah had been involved in the planning of the 2002 Mombasa attacks while based in Somalia. Another member of the Mombasa cell, Feisal Ali Nasser, was killed in August 2003 when he was confronted by Kenyan police and detonated a hand grenade.[91]

AQEA suffered its most serious leadership losses between 2006 and 2011, when Al-Shabaab and the foreigners in its ranks became the targets of concerted international counter-terrorism efforts: AQEA leader Abu Talha al-Sudani was reportedly killed by an airstrike in early January 2007, together with Abdillahi Ali Nahar 'Abu 'Uteyba', a senior Al-Shabaab commander. Saleh Ali Saleh Nabhan was killed in a commando raid in September 2009, just months after Al-Shabaab's senior military commander, Adan Hashi Ayrow, had been killed in a cruise missile strike. In June 2011, Fazul Abdallah Mohamed died in a shoot-out at a Somali government checkpoint.

AQEA's regional affiliates, however, continued to represent a potent threat to peace and security in the region, as the 2010 Kampala suicide bombings clearly indicated. Furthermore, documents allegedly obtained from Fazul's laptop at the time of his death suggested that he and his AQEA associates perceived Somalia as a base for conducting future attacks against foreign interests in other countries. One such plan proposed the kidnapping of the deputy Sudanese ambassador to Kenya in order to obtain the release of 'brother' Abu Abdallah from Sudanese custody. Another document proposed attacks on a variety of targets in the United Kingdom, including the embassies of Uganda, Burundi and Ethiopia, as well as Jewish community centres.

During the course of 2011, however, AQEA fortunes had clearly begun to change. The documents, allegedly retrieved from Fazul's briefcase, also hinted at a growing rift between Al-Shabaab's Somali leadership and its AQEA partners. Fazul's UK plan stipulated that the "martyrdom seekers" involved in the operation should have "absolute minimal contact with brothers in Somalia" and "be kept away from" Al-Shabaab forces.

Such innuendo appeared to confirm the suspicions of Al-Shabaab "Amir" Ahmed Abdi Godane, voiced to some close associates, that Fazul no longer trusted Al-Shabaab, and was more interested in waging jihad abroad than in Somalia.[92] In 2012, relations between Al-Shabaab and its foreign comrades-in-arms suffered another blow when Omar Hammami (a.k.a. Abu Mansuur Al-Amriki), a US national and probably Al-Shabaab's best-known foreign propagandist, issued two video messages describing a rift between Al-Shabaab and its foreign fighters, and claiming that his own life was in danger.[93]

By late 2012, the original AQEA leadership had either been eliminated, apprehended, or was operating under severe operational constraints. At the same time, prominent AQEA affiliates or associates within the region were also suffering attrition through law enforcement action and targeted killings.

It is doubtful whether AQEA figures who remain at large, such as Abdikadir Mohammed "Ikrima", and their residual support networks will be able to overcome these losses to reconstitute a coherent and operational entity. It seems more likely that AQEA will be superseded by an increasingly diffuse network of local extremist groups with such diverse aims, motivations and capabilities that they no longer merit the common appellation "Al-Qaeda".

HARAKAAT AL-SHABAAB AL-MUJAAHIDIIN

The most important of AQEA's local affiliates—the jewel in its jihadist crown—is Harakaat Al-Shabaab Al-Mujaahidiin, a Somali jihadist organisation whose lightning rise between 2006 and 2010 threatened to destabilise the entire region.

Al-Shabaab's pre-eminence within the AQEA constellation reflects the depth of Al-Qaeda's ties in Somalia since the early 1990s. Many of Al-Shabaab's leaders, including its ideological mentors—Hassan Dahir Aweys and Hassan Turki—were members of Al-Itihaad Al-Islaami (AIAI). Several top Al-Shabaab leaders, including Ibrahim Haji Jaama' and Adan Haashi Ayrow, were former members of AIAI who had trained in Afghanistan.

The trajectories of Al-Shabaab and AQEA became largely synonymous in the aftermath of the 2002 Mombasa attacks, when key AQEA figures fled to Somalia to seek refuge and a new base of operations. Sheltered and protected

by the embryonic Al-Shabaab, they gradually emerged as important influences on the Somali jihadist movement's leadership, encouraging its internationalist orientation and its admiration for Al-Qaeda.

Following the Ethiopian intervention in Somalia in December 2006, Al-Shabaab emerged as the backbone of the resistance movement, attracting hundreds of foreign fighters to its cause. Some of these, notably Omar Hammami and Jehad Mostefa, subsequently rose to positions of prominence in Al-Shabaab's hierarchy and played key roles in its outreach and propaganda campaigns. But only a minority of these foreigners could legitimately be described as members of Al-Qaeda, and the leadership of AQC remained, from Al-Shabaab's perspective, disappointingly detached from the Somali "jihad".

Moreover, Al-Shabaab was eager for AQC recognition and support, declaring its allegiance on multiple occasions, such as the 2009 video, *Labayk ya Osama* ("At your Service Osama"). AQC reciprocated with expressions of support, including a message from bin Laden himself entitled "Fight On, Champions of Somalia",[94] but declined to adopt Al-Shabaab as a full member of the Al-Qaeda family. Indeed, bin Laden had resisted a formal merger, privately advising Godane in August 2010 (addressing the Al-Shabaab 'Amir' by his *nom de guerre,* 'Abu Zubeyr') to downplay his group's ties to Al-Qaeda.[95]

Following bin Laden's death, Ayman Al-Zawihiri reversed this policy and announced the official merger with Al-Shabaab in a video message released in February 2012. But given the weakness of the two organisations at the time, the gesture amounted to little more than a franchise arrangement that may yet prove self-defeating, diluting the Al-Qaeda brand rather than propagating it.

While AQC's solidarity and moral support may be heartening to Al-Shabaab, it is hardly sufficient to reverse the movement's declining fortunes: Al-Shabaab has been routed from most of its former strongholds; its senior leadership has been severely depleted; and its revenues have been slashed by the loss of Kismayo and other southern Somali ports. The rebranding of Al-Shabaab as an Al-Qaeda affiliate may, however, help to open doors with AQAP—an organisation that Al-Shabaab has also courted for several years with little success—offering some indication as to Al-Shabaab's likely evolution in the immediate future.

Future Prospects for Al-Shabaab

Al-Shabaab's setbacks in the last year or so have placed the group's leadership under growing stress, creating de facto—albeit unacknowledged—rifts within the movement, and further depleting its already narrow base of public support.

The main axis of contention within the group divides Al-Shabaab's more militant, internationalist wing, headed by Godane, from the more pragmatic, nationalist wing (formerly known as Hisb'ul Islaam before its merger with Al-Shabaab in December 2010) headed by Hassan Dahir Aweys. Since March 2012, Aweys has taken public positions that are increasingly independent—and at times openly critical—of Godane's wing of the movement. Privately, Aweys has also made overtures via several diplomatic channels suggesting that he would like to strike a deal with Somalia's new government, re-inserting himself and his followers into the national political sphere.

Aweys's faction includes other prominent figures, including Mukhtar Roobow, Fu'aad Shangoole and Mohamed Sa'iid 'Atom', who have greater appeal amongst mainstream Somali Salafis than the leaders of Al-Shabaab's extremist wing. Al-Shabaab's replacement of Atom with Godane loyalist Yaasiin Kiilwe as its representative in Puntland has already cost the movement a degree of support amongst Salafi members of the Boosaaso business community. The formal departure of the Aweys faction could likewise erode support for Al-Shabaab amongst southern Somali Salafis.

From a military perspective, Al-Shabaab's diminished capacity and resources make it unlikely that the group will be able to sustain a meaningful military effort for much longer (although by December 2012, AMISOM's offensive against the group had lost some of its initial momentum, giving Al-Shabaab an opportunity to regroup and consolidate in certain areas). Pockets of Al-Shabaab control or influence, anchored in local clan dynamics, are likely to persist for some time across Somalia, but the movement is steadily being forced underground, reverting to its pre-2006 posture as a clandestine network whose actions feature targeted killings and occasional acts of terrorism. Although Al-Shabaab apparently views such acts as evidence of its continuing relevance, they contradict the widespread desire amongst ordinary Somalis for a return to normality, hurting the jihadist movement rather than helping it.

Shifting Northwards

Al-Shabaab's difficulties in southern Somalia have also encouraged the movement to shift its centre of gravity northwards to the Golis highlands, which are remote, relatively inaccessible and largely ungoverned. The area offers easy access to the Gulf of Aden via beach ports that various armed groups, including Al-Shabaab, have long used for the smuggling of weapons from Yemen.

As in the south, Al-Shabaab North East (ASNE) has enjoyed greatest success amongst clans that harbour grievances either against larger, more dominant clans, or the local authorities, or both. In Puntland, this pattern is manifest in pockets of Al-Shabaab activity in areas inhabited by the Warsengeli clan in eastern Sanaag region, the Ali Saleebaan and Dishiishe sub-clans in Bari region, and also in western Mudug region, mainly amongst members of the Leelkase clan. Growing resentment within Puntland against the Faroole administration may create opportunities for Al-Shabaab to broaden its local base of support.

Beginning in late 2006, Al-Shabaab—operating under the umbrella of the Islamic Courts Union (ICU)—established a relationship with Mohamed Sa'iid Atom's chiefly Warsengeli militia operating around Galgala in eastern Sanaag. But in late 2010, Atom's group was defeated and dispersed in a series of clashes with Puntland forces. Concerned that Atom might seek to strike a deal with the Puntland leadership, Al-Shabaab engineered the replacement of Atom in January 2012 with Yasiin Kiilwe, a close associate of Godane, and effectively seized control of Atom's force. Kiilwe's authority was bolstered by the endorsement of Sheikh Abdiqaadir Muumin, a senior Al-Shabaab ideologue from the Ali Saleebaan sub-clan of the Majeerteen, which resides in and around Bosaaso.

But Puntland may not prove as permissive an environment as Al-Shabaab had initially imagined. The removal of Atom as its local figurehead has reportedly prompted many local sympathisers to withdraw their support, depriving the group of both financial assistance and local facilitation networks. As in southern Somalia, ASNE may find itself politically and socially isolated, financially strapped, and reliant on sub-clan grievances to give any oxygen to its ambitions. If so, a more generalised and deliberate *hijra*, or exile, of Al-Shabaab across the Gulf to Yemen may become a more attractive—perhaps even inevitable—option.

AL-HIJRA (MUSLIM YOUTH CENTRE)

In January 2012, Al-Shabaab appointed the Kenyan jihadist, Ahmed Iman Ali, as its new "representative" for its activities in Kenya, thereby effectively recognising Ali Hijra, formerly known as the Muslim Youth Centre, or MYC as an affiliate organisation. The announcement made little difference in practical terms: since 2009, hundreds of MYC members had already travelled to Somalia to train and fight alongside Al-Shabaab and the two organisations had been cooperating in planning terrorist attacks across East Africa over much of the same period.

Like Al-Shabaab, Al-Hijra's jihadist origins intersect with the AQEA network responsible for the 1998 US embassy bombings and the 2002 Mombasa attacks. Al-Hijra's pre-eminent ideologue was Sheikh Aboud Rogo Mohammed, a firebrand Muslim cleric from Mombasa, whose inflammatory rhetoric and association with violent extremists brought him repeatedly into trouble with Kenyan law enforcement and put him squarely on the radar of Western intelligence services.

Rogo's embrace of jihadism dated from the early 1990s when he joined the short-lived Islamic Party of Kenya (IPK) as an activist at Mombasa's Kongo mosque and later preaching jihad at Sakina Mosque.[96] But Rogo first entered the public eye in 2002 for his association with the perpetrators of the Mombasa attacks, especially Fazul Abdallah Mohamed, whom he allegedly sheltered on Siyu Island, near Lamu, and with whom he was in regular contact by telephone around the time of the attacks.[97] Rogo, together with several other suspects, was charged by the Kenyan authorities for his alleged role in the operation, but at least one of his co-defendants, Omar Said Omar, denied that Rogo was a member of the terror group, and in 2005 Rogo was eventually acquitted for lack of evidence.

Rogo's militancy became more pronounced following his acquittal, and in 2006 he became an outspoken supporter of Somalia's ICU. At the same time, members of the Pumwani Muslim Youth (PMY), the precursor to the MYC / Al-Hijra began to travel to Somalia to fight alongside the ICU.[98] Amongst the early leaders of the PMY were at least two of Rogo's acolytes: Ahmed Iman Ali and Sylvester Opiyo Osodo.[99]

By early 2009, Ethiopian troops had withdrawn from Somalia and Al-Shabaab's military campaign was now directed against its former allies in the ICU, who had formed a new Somali transitional government. These developments did nothing to dampen the jihadist ardour of Rogo and the MYC, whose members were travelling in growing numbers to fight alongside Al-Shabaab in Somalia. Both Rogo's public sermons and MYC's weekly newsletter, Al-Misbah, were vociferous in their support for Al-Shabaab's jihad, and Al-Misbah routinely made reference to foreign jihadist causes, including Al-Qaeda. During the course of 2009, Ahmed Iman Ali relocated to Somalia to lead the MYC's armed wing in the Juba Valley, and later the same year Rogo himself reportedly travelled to Somalia to serve with Al-Shabaab and burnish his own jihadist credentials.

In early 2010, the MYC openly turned its sights towards Kenya, helping to organise street protests against the arrest of an extremist Muslim preacher from Jamaica, Abdallah al-Feisal, and the launch of a video message entitled *Nairobi Tutafika*, which advocated the expansion of 'jihad' to Kenya, declared support for Al-Shabaab, and featured images of the recently deceased Kenyan Al-Qaeda figure, Saleh Ali Saleh Nabhan.

In July 2010, Al-Shabaab conducted its first successful terrorist attack outside Somalia, deploying suicide bombers to attack two bars in Kampala, Uganda, where crowds had gathered to watch the football World Cup (a third bomber failed to detonate his device). Amongst those allegedly involved in the organisation of the operation were several Ugandans trained by Al-Shabaab in Somalia and at least one MYC associate, Idris Christopher Magondu, who was charged with having facilitated the travel of the suicide bombers through Kenya.

By December 2010, Rogo had returned to Kenya where he was again arrested, together with his close associate Abubakar Sharif (a.k.a. Makaburi) and charged in connection with an explosion near a Nairobi bus station. The cleric once again denied the charges but persisted in his advocacy of armed jihad in his homeland. During a series of meetings with MYC and Pumwani Riyadha Mosque Committee (PRMC) leaders in late 2011, Rogo advocated continuing support for Al-Shabaab's activities in both Somalia and Kenya, and strategised about the development of MYC as a "gateway" for Al-Shabaab into Kenya.[100] Rogo appeared to be increasingly impatient with the failure of violent extremism to take root in his home country, calling for greater focus on recruitment, mobilisation, and the need for violence to galvanise the struggle. At least two Al-Hijra cells began operating in Kenya in late 2011, exploring possible targets in Nairobi while seeking access to arms and explosives.

Al-Hijra's preparations for jihad in Kenya continued gathering momentum in early 2012 with the release of a video, featuring Ahmed Iman, in which he warned that "Kenya has declared war against Somalia and 'jihad' should now be waged inside Kenya which is legally a war zone", and the launch of *Gaidi Mtaani*,[101] a slick online magazine published in Kiswahili and English, aimed at an East African extremist audience. Meanwhile, in January 2012, Al-Shabaab officially announced the appointment of Ahmed Iman as its representative in Kenya, effectively merging the two organisations.

The stage appeared to be set for an upsurge of jihadist violence in Kenya, but events during the course of 2012 conspired to break Al-Hijra's stride. First, Kenyan Defence Forces (KDF), together with local Somali militia allies, made their long-awaited advance to Kismayo, pushing Al-Shabaab militia even further away from the Kenyan border and forcing the abandonment of training camps previously used by Al-Shabaab and Al-Hijra. Inside Kenya, security forces arrested a number of mid-ranking Al-Hijra figures, disrupting the group's networks and planning. In April 2012, Samir Khan "Abu Nuseyba", a senior Al-Hijra cleric and al-Shabaab advocate based in Mombasa, was found mutilated and murdered following his abduction from a public taxi, together with an associate, Mohamed Kassim Bekhit. Khan had been arrested by the Kenyan authorities in 2010 on terrorism-related charges, and Kenyan Muslim activists accused the police of his murder.

On 25 July 2012, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) designated Rogo for targeted sanctions – a travel ban and assets freeze -- describing him as "the main ideological leader of Al Hijra".[102] These measures were intended to curb Rogo's activities and his access to resources, but barely one month later he was also dead, gunned down in Mombasa by unknown assailants. Al-Shabaab immediately released a statement condemning his murder, and stating that although Rogo had not officially been a member of Al-Shabaab, he had shared "unbreakable religious ties with the Mujahideen."[103]

Just days before Rogo's death, the Security Council had also designated Abubakar Sharif "Makaburi" (a leading Kenyan jihadist cleric with whom Rogo had been arrested in 2010) for targeted measures. One week later, facing new charges for allegedly instigating violent protests against Rogo's murder, Makaburi surrendered to the Kenyan authorities to stand trial.

Where Next for Al-Hijra?

The death and detention of key Al-Hijra figures—especially Rogo—has disrupted the organisation's leadership, diluted its ideological authority and attenuated its residual ties to the old AQEA support networks in Kenya. The organisation nevertheless retains the potential to pose a serious threat to the security of Kenya and the wider region.

Al-Hijra has responded to recent setbacks with a low-key show of defiance: the organisation was linked to a number of grenade and improvised explosive device (IED) attacks in the Kenyan capital during the course of 2012. Elsewhere in Kenya, terrorist violence has tended to engender animosity between Muslims and Christians—including series of attacks on churches in the northeastern town of Garissa. Although not directly attributable to MYC, these incidents undoubtedly served the organisation's extremist agenda.

Despite suffering setbacks, in the near term Al-Hijra is likely to become more active: its principal leader, Ahmed Iman Ali, remains at large, gaining experience, confidence and credentials as a jihadist leader. Hundreds of Al-Hijra members have undergone training and experienced combat in Somalia between 2008-2012; following the loss of their bases, as Al-Shabaab withdraws further and further from the Kenyan border, many members of this jihadist cohort are likely to return to Kenya or travel to other East African countries—especially Tanzania, where they enjoy close ties to the Ansar Muslim Youth Centre (AMYC)—where they can rest and reorganise.

Those Al-Hijra members who return to Kenya may be able to take advantage of widespread disaffection within parts of Kenya's Muslim community, as well as the opportunistic patronage of some Muslim Kenyan political leaders who seek to exploit their commitment, organisation and discipline as an asset for campaigning. At the same time, despite significant progress by the Kenyan security services in recent years, Kenya itself remains a relatively permissive environment for terrorist groups, given its large, poorly governed urban spaces, endemic corruption, and high density of attractive potential targets.

Al-Hijra may also profit—in the short term—from the tensions and polarisation that are likely to accompany Kenyan elections in 2013; over the long term, the plight of the youth in slums like Nairobi's Majengo, where Al-Hijra was born, is likely to provide a steady flow of recruits.

The longer-term challenge for Al-Hijra will be to reconstitute its ideological leadership, redefine its purpose and recraft its message as its participation in Somali jihad gradually comes to a close. If it fails to do so, Al-Hijra may prove to be the last generation of direct AQEA descendants in Kenya.

ANSAAR MUSLIM YOUTH CENTRE (AMYC)[104]

Al-Hijra's prospects for revival may hinge on the fortunes of the nearly eponymous Tanzanian group, the Ansaar Muslim Youth Centre (AMYC) headed by Sheikh Salim Abdulrahim Barahiyan, which—like the Al-Hijra—has been linked to AQEA since the 1990s, looked to Aboud Rogo for inspiration, and since at least 2006 has been developing ties with Al-Shabaab.

Formed in the 1970s as the Tanzanian Muslim Youth Union (UVIKITA), the organisation was renamed AMYC in 1988 for the purpose of propagating Salafi Islam. In the late 1990s, the AMYC began to drift toward radicalism, apparently through its association with the Saudi-based charitable foundation Al-Haramayn, which provided funding to the AMYC. The head of Al-Haramayn's Tanzanian office between 1997 and 2003 was reportedly an Algerian known as Laid Saidi (a.k.a. "Abu Huzhaifa" a.k.a. Ramzi ben Mizauni ben Fraj).

In the aftermath of the 1998 US embassy bombings in Nairobi and Dar-es-Salaam, both Abu Huzhaifa and Al-Haramayn's Tanzanian office were accused of links to terrorism. Abu Huzhaifa was arrested and deported by the Tanzanian authorities in 2003; one year later, the Al-Haramayn office in Tanzania was designated by the UNSC as an affiliate of Al-Qaeda and closed.

According to the United Nations Monitoring Group on Somalia and Eritrea, following Abu Huzhaifa's deportation and the cessation of Al-Haramayn's Tanzanian operations, at least seven former employees of Al-Haramayn joined the AMYC. Two of these individuals, Nur Abubakar Maulana (a.k.a. "Abu Maulana") and Omar Suleiman, reportedly became acquainted with Aboud Rogo during their service with Al-Haramayn. Through this connection, AMYC recruits were routinely sent to study in Kenya at institutions associated with Rogo and the MYC/Al-Hijra: notably Masjid Musa, Kanamai and Masjid Sakina. The latter provided an early platform for Rogo's jihadist activism, and was identified by "Abdul Malik Bajabu", a detainee at Guantanamo who admitted to being a member of AQEA and a co-conspirator in the November

2002 Mombasas attacks, as a place where he and other youths were recruited to join the 'jihad' in Somalia.

Between 2006 and 2011, "Abu Maulana" and other prominent AMYC figures travelled regularly to Somalia to take part in jihad; numerous junior recruits followed suit. But in comparison with MYC/Al-Hijra, their strength and significance to the war effort were marginal.

Far more important were the linkages established between AMYC, Al-Hijra and Al-Shabaab that have permitted fighters from all three organisations to use Tanzania as a safe haven and base for planning operations elsewhere in the region. In June 2012, Tanzanian police arrested a German national of Turkish origin, Emrah Erdogan, on suspicion of being a member of Al-Shabaab and suspected involvement in a May 2012 bombing in Nairobi that injured over 30 people. Police were led to Erdogan by his communications with Al-Hijra operatives in Kenya and Tanzania who were themselves linked to Al-Shabaab and actively involved in planning operations in East Africa.

As Al-Shabaab steadily loses ground inside Somalia and the presence of Kenyan Defence Forces on the Kenya-Somali border makes movement between the two countries increasingly difficult, a growing number of fighters from Al-Shabaab, Al-Hijra and AMYC have begun to make the journey by sea to Tanzania—which is at risk of re-emerging as a secondary hub of jihadist activity in East Africa. Whether or not it does so will in part be defined by events elsewhere in the region, in part by the level of collaboration these itinerant jihadists receive from Tanzanian Salafi communities, and in part by whether the Tanzanian authorities allow their country to remain a permissive environment for extremist networks.

AL-QAEDA IN THE ARABIAN PENINSULA (AQAP): A FUTURE HOST FOR AQEA?

With Al-Shabaab in decline and Al-Hijra facing an uncertain future, Al-Qaeda's legacy in East Africa may in fact be bound more closely to the fortunes of Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) than to the remnants of AQEA. The reasons are partly historical: in 2006, as the UIC moved to consolidate power over south-central Somalia, Al-Shabaab sought to procure weapons,

including anti-aircraft weapons and sniper rifles, from Yemen, employing individuals allegedly associated to Al-Qaeda. The Yemeni authorities arrested and charged twelve individuals at the time, including eight foreigners who were extradited to their home countries. Two of the remaining suspects—one Yemeni national and a Somali named Abdi Osman Soli—were subsequently acquitted, according to an article in the *Yemen Times*.[105] The Yemeni, Awadh al-Masri, was found guilty and sentenced by the court on related charges. Al-Shabaab "Amir" Ahmed Abdi Godane later informed close associates that he had sent an agent to Yemen to purchase weapons in 2006, but that he had been arrested.[106]

In December 2009, Godane again sought to build bridges to AQAP, but this time with a broader agenda. Al-Shabaab not only needed arms—especially anti-tank weapons and mines—but also training for Al-Shabaab fighters and assistance with the development of the organisation's media wing. Godane was reportedly also eager to obtain access to Islamic scholars, probably to help the young jihadist movement establish ideological legitimacy, and to revive communications with AQC, which had recently been disrupted by the killing of a senior Somali Al-Qaeda figure in an airstrike near the Afghan-Pakistan border.[107]

Godane's decision to approach AQAP was influenced in large part by one of the foreign fighters in Al-Shabaab's ranks: Jehad Mostafa, an American citizen who had been inspired to wage jihad by the exhortations of AQAP ideologue Anwar al-Awlaki and had continued to correspond with him since arriving in Somalia in 2007.

Al-Shabaab's second approach to AQAP was only marginally more rewarding than the first. Godane's envoys were received by senior AQAP leaders including "Amir" Nasir al-Wuhayshi (a.k.a. "Abu Basir"), Al-Awlaki and Samir Khan, who made pledges of support. But after months of dilatory discussions and delays, no meaningful assistance materialised and the liaison mission was abandoned.

An AQAP-Al-Shabaab Alliance?

An alliance between Al-Shabaab and AQAP now appears more likely than ever, but by default rather than by design. Al-Shabaab's strategic withdrawal into the Golis range of northern Somalia is no doubt guided to a certain degree by the group's desire for access to the Gulf of Aden and proximity to Yemen. Some Al-Shabaab leaders, including ASNE "Amir" Yasiin Kiilwe, reportedly visited Aden (Yemen) in early 2012 for the purpose of obtaining Yemeni travel documents. But if northern Somalia proves less hospitable than anticipated, Al-Shabaab

will have to continue to seek new bases—Yemen being the closest alternative. Al-Shabaab's formal adoption by AQC in early 2012, however symbolic, may help to open doors with AQAP and ensure closer cooperation than in 2009. Moreover, in addition to hospitality and support, AQAP is currently the most active member of the Al-Qaeda family, offering foreign fighters—including, potentially, Al-Shabaab—richer opportunities for training and combat experience than Somalia.

A temporary relocation of Al-Shabaab's leadership to Yemen could therefore be cast as a form of *hijra*: a deliberate strategy to allow the movement to regroup and reinvigorate itself.

CONCLUSIONS

Al-Qaeda's footprint in East Africa has come a long way since the early 1990s. Once the seat of Al-Qaeda's leadership and a key theatre of operations, the region has drifted further and further from Al-Qaeda's orbit, ceding primacy to the Middle East, North Africa and South Asia.

AQEA has likewise devolved from being an integral part of Al-Qaeda Core, first into a regional network, and subequently into an elastic connective tissue linking local and national extremist groups. However, the decline of AQEA by no means spells the demise of Islamist extremism in East Africa and the Horn. Al-Qaeda's example continues to inspire local militant groups and to provide them with a meta-narrative within which to frame their own parochial struggles, albeit without the kind of mentoring, guidance and financial support that Al-Qaeda was once able to provide.

The steady expansion of Salafi doctrine within the region, combined with poverty, instability and state fragility, will ensure that the pool of potential recruits to jihadist causes continues to grow. As Al-Qaeda's unifying influence recedes, these movements and the responses to them must be increasingly shaped by local conditions and capabilities: conflating them under the conceptual banner of Al-Qaeda will serve only to ascribe exaggerated importance and community of purpose to these groups, while diverting attention from the underlying causes and drivers of their violence.

AL-QAEDA IN THE ARABIAN PENINSULA: PROFILE, PRESUMPTIONS AND PREDICTIONS TO 2018

The death of Al-Qaeda (AQ) leader Osama bin Laden and the attrition of core personnel has led to considerable speculation as to what the future holds for the terrorist organisation and its regional affiliates.[108] Of these, the Yemen-based Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) is frequently identified as the most potent threat.[109] This threat is characterised by three distinct elements. The first is the organisation's declared intention to strike the US and its allies, evidenced by the attempted bombing of a US-bound airliner in December 2009, the UPS parcel bomb threat of October 2010 and a further failed airline plot in 2012 timed to coincide with the second anniversary of bin Laden's death. The second is the enduring radicalising effect of AQAP's former principal English-language propagandist and inciter, Yemeni-American Anwar Al-Awlaqi, who was killed on 30 September 2011. From the shooting spree undertaken by Major Nidal Malik Hasan in Fort Hood in November 2009 to the attempted Times Square bombing in May 2010 and the March 2011 conviction of former British Airways employee Rajib Karim on Awlaqi-inspired terrorism charges, AQAP's English-language output is alleged to have inspired numerous actual or attempted acts of 'lone wolf' or individual terrorism. The third element is the very real threat that AQAP will continue to exploit the current security lacuna in Yemen by increasing its attacks on domestic and international targets, enhancing its recruitment efforts and expanding its geographical reach. Using its proxy Ansar al-Shariah in 2011 AQAP exploited the vacuum created by the Yemeni government focus on regime survival, rather than national security, to seize broad swathes of territory and declare self-styled emirates.

This year-long focus on holding geographical territory ended with a Yemeni military ground response supported by a sustained and dramatically expanded campaign of US drone strikes. US drone strikes in Yemen nearly tripled in 2012 compared to 2011, with 53 recorded against 18, according to the New America Foundation.[110] Questions continue to be raised as to whether the focus on drone strikes and the resulting civilian collateral damage actually serve to drive recruitment into AQAP rather than degrade the organisation.[111] As Yemen falteringly attempts to implement a national dialogue and overhaul the political system, it will be the national and international attempts to address the core socio-economic grievances so effectively instrumentalised by AQAP, as well as

the efficacy of counter terrorism operations, that will determine the group's longer term prospects. AQAP's narrative feeds on social injustice, poverty, lack of opportunity and the perception of both external and domestic threats—many of the same core grievances espoused by those seeking systemic change in Yemen.

THE JIHADIST MILIEU AND THE RISE OF AQAP

The presence of radical Islamists—indeed of violent jihadists—in Yemen is not new. Yemen has traditionally supplied foot soldiers for classical jihad enterprises, be it resistance to the Russians in Afghanistan or the US in Iraq. As Laurent Bonnefoy argues, because such militancy was not directly criminalised by society or the state in Yemen, violence inside the country tended to remain marginal and rarely targeted the state.[112] Instead, Yemen's broad spectrum of armed Islamist actors has been routinely co-opted by the state, whether to fight the socialists in the south during the civil war or, together with tribal levies, to attack the Zaydi Shia Houthi rebels in northern Yemen, with whom the government has been in intermittent conflict since 2004.

Shortly after the unification in 1990 of the Yemen Arab Republic (YAR, or North Yemen) and the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY, or South Yemen), hundreds of mujahideen from the Afghan and Pakistani fronts either returned to or sought refuge in the country. These fighters—including Tariq al-Fadhli, Jamal al-Badawi and Nasir al-Bahri ("Abu Jandal"), who was Osama bin Laden's former bodyguard—were participants in the Afghan jihad but are part of a generation that has largely refrained from violently confronting the government. They established a working, almost symbiotic relationship with the regime of former President Saleh, whereby some jihadists even fought *on behalf* of the state against attempts at secession in the south.[113] Attacks on non-Yemeni interests included the December 1992 attack targeting of US military personnel staying at the Golden Mohur Hotel in Aden (allegedly planned and led by Tariq al-Fadhli); an aborted attempt by another AQ-affiliated group to shoot down US Air Force transports in the same year using rocket-propelled grenades (RPGs)[114] and the bombing of the USS Cole in 2000 and the French oil tanker the Limburg in 2002. However, in stark contrast to this "first generation" of jihadists in Yemen, a new wave of violent radicalisation, inspired by transnational networks like AQ rather than local conflicts, swept across the Arabian Peninsula and found a base in Yemen.[115] This second

generation had fought in Iraq, Afghanistan or both. The current leader of AQAP, Nasir al-Wahayshi (a former secretary for bin Laden), is part of this generation. Many had been victims of torture at the hands of Yemen's security services and have been unwilling to be co-opted by the government.

The Yemeni government believed AQ in Yemen had been crippled after a Predator drone strike killed its chief operative Abu Ali al-Harithi in 2002 and then again after the capture of his successor Muhammad Hamdi al-Ahdal in 2003. However, the escape of 23 AQ operatives from a Political Security Organisation (PSO) prison in Sana'a in 2006 revitalised the organisation and marked a new phase as militants turned their jihad both inwards against the Yemeni state and its security forces, as well as to more traditional enemies in Saudi Arabia and the US and its allies. The period 2007-2011 saw a series of kidnapping-murders and suicide bombings targeting foreign tourists, aid workers, and Yemeni security forces as well as sophisticated international operations. In 2011 and 2012, taking advantage of the Saleh regime's preoccupation with survival, AQAP established control of several governorates in southern Yemen.

In a statement released on 8 February 2010, AQAP's Saudi deputy leader and former Guantanamo detainee Saeed al-Shihri gave a clear indication of the nature of the relationship of the organisation to what is termed Al-Qaeda Core (AQC), the nucleus of Al-Qaeda operating in the border area between Afghanistan and Pakistan. Al-Shihri addressed his comments to "our sheikhs and amirs in the general command in Khorasan [Afghanistan]" and in doing so described those self-identified as Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula as "your mujahideen children in the Peninsula of Mohammad." The current incarnation of AQAP, formed by a unification of the Saudi and Yemeni branches in 2009, has several distinct advantages over its Saudi predecessor. AQAP enjoys wide autonomy and employs a horizontal rather than a hierarchical structure to aid survivability.[116] As such, although AQAP has an "emir", a deputy, a Shura Council and a series of military, religious and media committees, it has devolved leadership to semi-autonomous local cells. This is a clear example of organisational learning. Al-Qaeda in Saudi Arabia was devastated by the deaths of key leaders such as Yusuf Al-Uyayri and Abdel Aziz Al-Muqrin. During the same period, the drone strike that killed Al-Qaeda's leader in Yemen, Abu Ali Al-Harithi, in November 2002 served to decapitate the organisation. The AQAP of today is therefore configured to ensure survival, with elements of both administrative and operational centralisation (such as the fact that all new

recruits were approved by the now-deceased leader of the religious committee, Adel Al-Abab a.k.a. "Abu Zubayr") and pragmatic decentralisation, with cell leaders in touch through a series of human couriers but most members unaware of the identity of their colleagues.

Although it is unknown how many members and supporters AQAP currently has, one Yemeni analyst estimated the group had hundreds of members, thousands of supporters, with "tens of thousands of Yemenis" sharing its narrative of grievances against both the state and the international community. Supply significantly outstrips demand—as in the Saudi manifestation of AQAP recruits do not volunteer: they are selected. The group recruits its new members from areas that are relatively stable and prosperous such as Sana'a city, Ta'ez, Ibb, al-Hodeida and Aden and then sends newly recruited members to desolate areas, such as the Sana'a governorate, Mareb, al-Jawf, Shabwah, al-Bayda'a where they are trained. In the final stage of the recruitment process individuals are sent to areas of jihad or the "Islamic emirates", such as Abyan, Rada'a, Arhab and Jaar. The AQAP recruitment process has several stages, from intensive efforts to indoctrinate future members with AQAP's ideology and worldview, the swearing of allegiance, tasking with a simple mission (eg, performing the night watch in one's own neighbourhood), to attending a forty-day course during which they study Sharia and delve into the subject of jihad, followed by three-day training in the use of weapons.

The top of the organisation more closely fits the more conventional pattern of Al-Qaeda and its affiliates. The senior cadre, such as Nasir Al-Wahayshi and Saeed Al-Shihri have links to Afghanistan, even if not as far back as the Soviet jihad. They enjoy personal connections to AQC and are deeply committed to both their local and regional agendas—the overthrow of "apostate" rulers in Sana'a and Riyadh, the declaration of an Islamic emirate and the expulsion of non-Muslims from the Arabian Peninsula—and the ultimate transnational ambition, the restoration of the Islamic caliphate.[117]

Ideologically motivated and recruited in tightly knit social groups comprising family, close friends and fellow fighters, the leadership of AQAP was further radicalised by the US invasion and subsequent occupation of Afghanistan and Iraq. It also developed a global brand through the profile of jihadist entrepreneurs such as Anwar Al-Awlaqi, and has been transformed by user-generated social media that has lowered the barrier to jihadist activism, particularly for an English-speaking, technologically proficient Western youth

demographic. In order to broaden its appeal and increase public support, thereby avoiding the fate that befell the Saudi incarnation of Al-Qaeda, the organisation has "resolved possible tensions between its global and local agendas in the short term by carrying out high-profile attacks abroad, while concurrently striking local targets".[118] In this way, AQAP conflates both transnational and local grievances of AQC and Yemenis respectively. It has also become adept at weaving a coherent narrative that frames perceived social injustice and regime repression with US support for the Yemeni government and the global oppression of Muslims.[119]

This highly effective and disciplined strategic communication campaign has been central to AQAP's success in mobilising and recruiting both amongst Yemenis and disaffected English-speaking non-Yemeni audiences. This "hybridisation" of AQAP has fused target sets in a way unimaginable to the earlier generation of Al-Qaeda personnel in Saudi Arabia.[120] In early jihadist literature, Yemen was a safe haven rather than an active front.[121] But Abu Musab Al-Suri identified in his 1999 tract, *The Yemeni People's Responsibility Towards Muslims' Holy Sites and Their Wealth*, that Yemen's social fabric and tribal structure made its people ideal targets for jihadist mobilisation. Poverty and feelings of injustice made people willing mujahedeen. Such sentiments were echoed in AQAP's first media outputs, such as the second edition of its online Arabic magazine *Sada al-Malahim* ["the Echo of Epic Battles"] in which contributor Abu Hammam al-Qahtani stated, "[Here] the land is ripe for preparation, and we must unify our efforts".

THE ROLE OF THE TRIBES

In addition to widespread socioeconomic grievances that increase support for militant attacks on the state and its security forces, Yemen's tribal nature is central to AQAP's approach to mobilisation and recruitment.[122] For eleven centuries, Yemen was ruled as a theocracy under the religious leadership of a Zaidi imam.[123] Prior to the 1962 republication revolution, the two largest tribal confederations in north Yemen, the Hashid and Baqil, played a critical role in supporting the imams' rule, and were described as "the wings of the Imamate".[124] But in former south Yemen, tribalism was diluted, first under British colonialism and then under the socialist People's Democratic Republic of Yemen. Nevertheless, throughout much of Yemen tribal affinity remains strong. The tribe, or *qabila*, is led by a sheikh who sits above a network of clan elders (*a'yan al-qabila*). Power

is mediated and the sheikh's continued power and his position are dependent on the consent and goodwill of the elders who themselves depend on the goodwill and continued support of their constituents'.[125] Tribal law (*'urf*) is customary and regulates inter- and intratribal relations, co-existing with sharia law and constitutional law. Tribal law is frequently preferred, as evidenced by the presentation of vehicles and gifts by President Saleh to the relatives of Sheikh Jaber Al-Marwani to "pay for" the unlawful killing of the Marib deputy governor, who was accidentally killed in an air strike in May 2010.

Yemen has a history of tension between its powerful tribes and the state: when the state is perceived to be overstepping its prerogatives, tribes will rebel. But, using a complex system of patronage politics fuelled by a rentier economy, former President Saleh sought to alter the state-tribal dynamic, co-opting traditional tribal leadership through the disbursement of oil revenues.[126] Such revenues, accruing directly to the state, "have underwritten a patronage system that has altered traditional mechanisms of resource distribution by attaching the well-being of leaders in the periphery to the discretionary largesse of the central leadership".[127] Saudi Arabia has used similar cash payments to secure tribal allegiances. As tribal leaders have moved to the capital Sana'a in search of material benefits, creating the phenomenon of the "city sheikh", traditional mechanisms of accountability have been weakened at local level.[128] As a result, state-tribal relations have been altered, weakening governance in tribal areas and opening up space for AQAP to claim that the government and traditional leaders have ignored or abandoned tribal areas, thus increasing the resonance of AQAP's narrative of social injustice.

If Yemen's tribes and tribal system are not the immediate cause of Yemen's current instability, to what extent are the tribes fostering instability by providing material support to AQAP? "AQAP has sensed the widespread disaffection with the degree to which power and wealth has been centralised by the regime and is working to frame itself as a viable contender for the public's political loyalties."[129] Although fieldwork has confirmed AQAP is not popular in Yemen, its social justice and grievance narrative does resonate with the Yemeni population, and AQAP has astutely tailored its message to tribal concerns about a predatory state.[130] AQAP is trying to portray itself as part of an alternative governance solution, rather than just an Islamist group fighting the government."[131] AQAP has sought to instrumentalise tribal grievances against the central state to aid its recruitment and secure safe haven in tribal areas such as Abyan, Marib and Shabwah.[132]

This military campaign concentrated in Marib, Jawf, Shabwa,

> Abyan, Sana'a, and Hadr Mawt that they have concealed from the media, what is it other than a step to strike the tribes and their sons [based on] frail and erroneous pretexts? Its true aim is to break the tribes' prestige, strip them of their weapons, control their land, and kill their sons to make it easy for the vile agents, and with them the Crusader campaign, to humiliate you. Be warned.[133]

Whilst Yemeni tribes may share little ideological affinity with AQAP, Yemeni government and US strikes on tribal areas have served to markedly exacerbate state-tribe relations. A clear example of this was what AQAP dubbed the "Battle of Mareb" on 30 July 2009 when tribesmen repulsed Yemeni government forces who shelled tribal land in the course of an operation targeting AQAP. The confirmation by Wikileaks that air strikes conducted in December 2009 were conducted by the US but claimed by the Yemeni government has served to validate AQAP claims that the Yemeni president is a US proxy, bent on destroying the autonomy of the tribes and stealing Yemen's oil wealth. Interwoven with themes of global Muslim oppression, particularly the highly resonant Palestinian cause and graphic footage of the civilian casualties of air strikes, AQAP has succeeded in part in portraying a joint US-Yemeni government assault on traditional tribal and Islamic values.[134] In addition, AQAP has sought to build enhanced connections with tribes, both through intermarriage and the provision of basic services to communities suffering from insufficient state service delivery.[135] "AQAP has sensed the widespread disaffection with the degree to which power and wealth have been centralised by the regime and is working to frame itself as a viable contender for the public's loyalties."[136] An online interview with Adel al-Abab on 22 April 2011 gives a fascinating insight into AQAP's strategy in this regard. Al-Abab states that AQAP has created a group called the Movement of al-Sharia Supporters (Harakat Ansar al-Shariah) to attract local people to Sharia rule in areas under their control. He notes that AQAP has many cells in Sana'a, its influence is increasing in Sa'da, al-Jawf, Marib and Shabwah. It is in these tribal areas that AQAP has fostered "an imagined tribal identity."[137] Al-Abab stresses that AQAP is striving to be popular not elitist, providing public services and meeting the needs of the people.[138]

Whilst it is correct to claim that AQAP's ideology has little resonance with Yemen's tribes and the latter have used the presence of AQAP to secure concessions from the state, its "example of 'resistance' to the Yemeni regime and the United States engenders sympathy within the tribes and other segments of

the wider Yemeni populace."[139] The result is increasing ties between AQAP and certain Yemeni tribes based on a common enemy. AQAP openly acknowledges the connection between air strikes in tribal areas and its efforts to expand its presence. Discussing a deceased AQAP colleague Muhammad Umyar al-Kilwi, AQAP stated "After the unjust shelling of al-Ma'jalah village in Abyan, he started preaching and stimulating the tribes. He illustrated to them the methodology of the mujahidin and the reality of the Crusader war against the Arabian peninsula."[140] AQAP's prescription is simple. "This oppression and corruption will be eliminated only by jihad in the cause of God."[141] If AQAP is to consolidate its presence in Yemen, then ultimately it will require territory, and this, as in the case of Al-Qaeda tribal relations in Iraq, is likely to prove its downfall.[142] Following attempts to hold territory in 2011-2012 the emergence of anti-AQAP tribal militias 'popular committees', reminiscent of the Sahwa ("Awakening") in Iraq, demonstrate that AQAP's governance prescriptions do not enjoy the same resonance as its grievance narratives.[143]

FUTURE PROSPECTS

Since the start of the Arab uprisings and the death of Osama bin Laden, two common themes have emerged. The first is that the events in Egypt and Tunisia demonstrate that youthful protests are able to achieve change without armed violence, critically undermining Al-Qaeda's violent rhetoric. The second is that the core demand of the protesters, democratic change, and the largely secular nature of the uprisings, leave Al-Qaeda floundering. On this reading, the inability of Al-Qaeda to respond meaningfully to these events or participate in a tangible way is exacerbated by the death of its figurehead and leader.

However, the death of Bin Laden did not negatively impact AQAP,[144] other than perhaps resulting in AQC having less control over its regional affiliate.[145] AQAP publicly supported the Arab awakening, and appears to be seeking to take advantage of the instability in Yemen. Through both rhetorical support and an increase in the number of attacks on state security organs, it is hoping to bolster its own legitimacy. AQAP has also sought to boost its local market share, maximising its gains at the expense of the government as the state has retreated, with AQAP or other actors from the armed Islamist mix in the south of the country holding ground in Jaar, Zinjibar, Hawta, Lawder and areas of Abyan,

Lahij and other tribal governorates in 2011 and 2012. Recognising the brand limitation of Al-Qaeda, the use of Ansar Al-Shariah was a deliberate tactic not to alienate local constituencies and increase recruitment prospects.

Despite the prevailing alarmism in the West and among Yemeni government circles, AQAP is not about to take over Yemen,[146] and grassroots support for AQAP is not widespread. Nevertheless, it is also the case that targeted strikes can only ever attempt to "empty the bucket, never turn off the recruitment tap". Today is not 2002 and the organisation cannot be decapitated; indeed, in the absence of effective government control on the ground, the threat from AQAP cannot be contained from the air alone. By expanding the target set to include non-AQAP Islamist militants opposed to the government, the government and the US risk inadvertently broadening the appeal of AQAP in Yemen by providing a common cause around which both AQAP and non-AQAP militants can rally. As Nabil Bukairi, director of the Abaad Research Centre in Sana'a, put it: "You cannot fight an entire country. The ideology of jihad is wide spread in the south, and to uproot it, you would have to kill millions of people."[147]

Yemen is not in danger or becoming a failed state because of AQAP. Rather it is the manifest failings of the Yemeni state that have had a catalytic effect on the growth of AQAP. Such failings have been brought into sharp relief by contemporary events in Sana'a. These events include not only the protests demanding democratic change in the country, but also the alienation of tribes from the state, the Houthi rebellion in the north and growing calls for secession in the south, all of which should be the priority issues for international attention. AQAP is today less like a delineated terrorist organisation, and more like a social movement or insurgency. It is hybridised and opportunistic, having fused salient local grievances with transnational themes in order to broaden its appeal, particularly to the Yemeni disaffected youth demographic. This makes it the modern face of the Al-Qaeda threat.

A comparison with the rise of the Syrian armed Islamist group associated with Al-Qaeda in Iraq, Jabhat al-Nusra, is apposite. On 28 December 2012 an audio message purportedly from the head of Jabhat al-Nusra, Abu Muhammad al-Jolani, was released. He urged Jabhat al-Nusra and affiliated groups to conduct a hearts and minds campaign by endearing themselves to the people by behaving in an appropriate manner, showing compassion, and thus winning their confidence. He stated: "I call on all of you because we are striving in earnest for convergence, cooperation and mutual understanding to heal the wounds of this

Muslim community and turn the page of injustice and tyranny to the radiant pages of justice and charity. Beware, beware my dear brothers not to disappoint the hopes of Muslims who have put their trust and faith in us all." He stressed the importance of adhering to the tenants of faith such as prayer and charity, as well as urging members to provide basic necessities such as food and fuel, to assist in setting up clinics to provide medical assistance, as well as to help with reconstruction. In addition, he urged adherents to provide security and adjudicate disputes saying that "the collapse of authority leaves a vacuum best filled by you."[148]

The speed of change throughout the Middle East and North Africa since 2011 has demonstrated that a policy of Soviet-era containment manifested since the Cold War by support for repressive dictatorships that suppressed, rather than emancipated their populations, catalysed the appeal of Al-Qaeda. Instead, as the Arab Spring has shown, populations desire economic growth, employment and good governance in the place of the deficient development outcomes, conflict and militancy that characterise life in so much of this region. As the recently released US National Strategy for Counterterrorism elucidates, a comprehensive approach to tackling Al-Qaeda must include "objectives such as promoting responsive governance and respect for the rights of citizens, which will reduce Al-Qaeda's resonance and relevancy."[149] Though intelligence-led kinetic activity cannot lightly be discounted as part of the solution, the true antidote to AQAP in Yemen will be the recognition of the peculiar ecology of modern-day Yemen, in which a range of grievances play a role. An over-reliance on kinetic stand-off capabilities will result in a widening of the conflict and an increase in the threat posed by AQAP, both in Yemen and internationally, given that "tactical successes can have unintended consequences that sometimes contribute to costs at the strategic level."[150] Commenting on the fact that poorly targeted drone strikes have swelled recruitment into AQAP, Johnsen notes that the "current approach implemented by the Obama administration is not dismantling, disrupting and defeating al-Qaeda as we are so often told. Instead it is exacerbating the problem and expanding the threat."[151] The first step to reducing the threat posed by AQAP is a transition to a post-Saleh participatory democratic political process that can address Yemen's looming humanitarian and economic crises. Combating AQAP as a symptom rather than a cause of Yemen's instability should form part of this more nuanced approach that eschews a singular focus on the unachievable goal of decapitating AQAP, focussing instead on addressing the political, social and economic conditions that drive recruitment into extremism and increase the resonance of AQAP's violent rhetoric.

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